RICARDO G. CURCI

THE LOST NOTEBOOKS

To Mom, in her labyrinth

To Laura, on her Ferris wheel

“Man is fundamentally a predatory animal with infinite means of being so. He who wages war against us steals our peace, he who lies to us steals our truth, he who defrauds and squanders our labor steals our health, he who fails to uphold justice or administers it poorly steals our justice. Man is predatory by nature; the difference lies in the fact that the strong prey on others, and the weak prey on each other.”

Agustín Álvarez

Preface:
CONFESSION OF PRINCIPLES

The texts presented here were found among the various unclassified papers in the apartment on Sarmiento Street where Cecilia Taboada lived until her death. Her literary executor, Dr. Bernardo Ruiz, oversaw their collection. Among them were several pages containing a series of comments that Cecilia had almost certainly intended as a possible prologue to her novel. The rest are references and notes on themes and characters, perhaps of little value even to the casual reader, as they contain illegible words or were written in an almost telegraphic style on slips of paper from a diary, paper napkins from a bar, and even on the backs of prescriptions. But the most valuable material consists of the notebooks that the author kept in different places throughout her apartment.

Dr. Ruiz and I never visited that place together; the reasons were personal, of course. We knew that our memories of walking through those austere rooms where she lived in her final years would only interfere with each other. We would compare notes later, at the bar "La Academia" on Callao Street. Between the coffee and whiskey we alternated, he would tell me about the apartment whose key he kept, making a copy to share with me. We never spoke directly about her last night there; I don't think she needed to know, and for me, it was a kind of treasure I was reluctant to share.

We were talking then about the papers and notebooks we had found. I found most of the notes scattered on his desk and in the drawers, also on the nightstand, behind the remains of medicine boxes and insulin vials. But Ruiz found the most substantial items. Among the books in his library, he found

spiral notebooks with a whole series of writings—poetry, fiction, and essays—and others simply more or less developed notes on unfinished ideas. Then, on the shelves of the bedroom closet , he found the stack of sheets bound with sisal twine. There were the drafts of the articles he had contributed to various magazines, but also many more unpublished ones, and of course, the finished manuscript of the novel that was published posthumously.

We would stay until nearly two or three in the morning comparing those papers, protecting them from any stains the glasses might cause. When we found words smudged by something that had diluted the ink, we would look at each other for a moment, telling each other that Cecilia had spilled a few drops of the water she used to take her medicine with on that tiny bit of paper. Then we would put the papers away again, get up from our chairs with our folders under our arms, and shake hands. We left at different times; one of us would pay at the counter while the other went out onto the street. Each of us walked in opposite directions along the sidewalk.

From all these writings, Dr. Ruiz and I made an exhaustive and respectful selection, and in some cases, because they were fragments of high literary value, we retouched the gaps produced by the illegibility of the manuscript. This edition is both a tribute to the author's lucid intelligence and her literary and psychological talent, and a personal satisfaction as an editor. My close relationship with the author, extensive over time but developed in brief and sporadic intervals, allowed us to delve into long conversations and explore conflicting emotions. And this, ultimately, is the essence that can be gleaned from her life, in my opinion: a lucidity that touched the very limits of intelligence, even venturing, at times in its darkest moments, into the strange realms of the intuitive, and even the magical.

Cecilia's characters defy categorization, even though they possess traits that define them and place them within certain parameters, for purely literary purposes. They are multifaceted characters, and above all, multifaceted, slippery and steep edges along which they spend almost all their time. Ultimately, they succumb to one side or the other. The author knew this with absolute clarity, and like her characters, she herself immersed herself in these places, which in her own time might be a suburban street, an apartment she had known for a long time, on any given night, or she might become steeped

in ancestral memories of places as improbable to our daily lives as remote jungles and unexplored rivers, or delve into the lives of primitive tribes.
I witnessed her final tragedy, and although it was Bautista Beltrame who dared to recount that brief final chapter of her life, it was I who had the privilege, as if before the two sides of an ancient coin, of witnessing her wandering along that edge. A thin thread of Ariadne that ended up being cut at the exact moment for her, perhaps, but leaving us speechless with astonishment and overcome with grief.

Leandro Mallea
“The Secret Gathering” Editions

CONSTRUCTION OF THE ENIGMAS

A poem is an enigma, if we understand by that a construction of aesthetic formality whose purpose is to objectively demonstrate, with concrete facts—be they words, images, symbols—a reality transformed into subjectivity by personal characteristics. As in the creation of a visual image by the eye and brain, reality penetrates through the sensory organs —the eye and its internal sensory structures—carried by the nerve to the neurological center by means of a curious inversion that seems a strange irony played on us by God—and let us take His existence for granted , for the relief and flexibility of our consciousness—and deposited in the limbo of the subconscious. Filtered then by the primary censors, poorly paid, surely, with little education, and still traumatized by the remnants of the abhorrent sentimentality they are beginning to hate, it then passes, now free of all ornamentation, into the unconscious.

In this dark terrain, where there may be a vast swamp from which there is no escape, strange monsters sometimes emerge that we think we don't know when exposed to the light of day. But do we recognize an illness in our own bodies when we see it for the first time? It belongs to us, and because it is ours, we know it is part of us, or perhaps we ourselves. Our heart is one of our many organs, but we are also inside it. We are our illness.

Impressions from the outside world are thus subjectivized without practically any participation from us—that is, from our consciousness, which we trivially call our essence. The censors hidden in the countless subterranean recesses of the mind dig, gnaw, and destroy what they dislike. Who are they? Representatives of heredity? Ancestral forces of the race? The sewage residue of hidden experiences from the early years of life?

Sometimes I wonder where the initial boundary of our memories lies. Some believe they remember when they were two or three years old, others only recover their memories from the age of five. But I've wondered if all those images aren't nothing more than imaginings assembled from the dust found under the bed, with which we form a material made of external words and voices that have told us stories during a Sunday afternoon nap. And we construct beautiful or horrible visions that fit perfectly into the structure of our psyche, the very same one that the true experiences we don't remember and will never remember have constructed . Consciousness is the ornament we apply to inexplicable deformities so that they can be tolerated. Censorship, then, is the basis of our thinking.

And when we write, words are symbols of ideas that are, in turn, inverted images of what are perhaps the true experiences locked away in our minds. If this formula were so easy, I tell myself, there would be no other method than to invert our senses to find the truth. But even if we were willing to do so, isn't this formula just another method of the old censors hidden in each of our neurons? To put it another way, the brain is a universe full of constellations: countless groups of planetary systems with suns in various states of decay, and infinite volcanic rocks we call planets, even if our alchemy were the same as that which governs them. A neuron is a large house with many rooms and long hallways, and within it lives the electrifying energy of the invisible. Lights that are on can be turned off, but in the darkness, where will we find the

switch to turn them back on? Walking along, feeling our way along the walls, stumbling at the risk of hurting ourselves and never getting up again. And meanwhile, purring sounds can be heard, perhaps hissing, and sometimes the sound of chewing and the peculiar swallowing of the remains of a massacre. Immense rooms made of darkness. And if the light were turned on, perhaps they would be just small rooms like the drawers of an old sewing box: one for each size of button, for each needle and thimble, for each spool of thread. There's a certain charm in imagining God as a seamstress from an old neighborhood, fifty-five years old, perhaps, a spinster, in a boarding house in the La Boca district, sewing to live since she was seventeen. God's arthritic hands sew with fingers that no longer feel the threads, full of scars from the prickings that the thimbles couldn't prevent. Already in the boarding house room, this strange seamstress lives almost in shadows, like her light and almost blind eyes, because the light hurts her so much, and that's why she covers the windows with pieces of fabric from old dresses. And on the floor there are mountains of fabrics and antique lace, which sometimes shift. And the old seamstress sometimes looks up from her sewing to warn the censors to calm down. Soon they will leave the port, heading for the corridor that will lead them to other rooms or to the street door, where they will walk along cobblestones between broken sidewalks, or along potholed asphalt, or along the dirt of narrow country lanes. They will arrive in the open air, bathed in sunlight, so bright it will be almost blinding. And their task will be complete.
The extreme white is the sum of all colors, the symbiosis of all that is possible: a blank sheet of paper is humanity's greatest pain. It is where all possibilities exist and we fail to see them, where we must dig without destroying, where we must perhaps pour a developing fluid devised by science, so that the images of what we are may emerge.
We are what we do not know, and the much overrated feelings are mere imitations, poor exfoliations with acrid smells that do nothing but immerse us in tragedy.
That is man: tragedy as a construct. The skeleton that is nothing more than bone to support the structure of the mind.
Tragedy calms us because it makes us feel the irremediable pain that consoles us, because it makes us aware of ourselves and dispels the mysteries of the

unconscious, that creation that Austrian, or German, and so many other doctors dreamed up on rainy afternoons in Prague or Berlin, listening to the stories of deranged men and women who have seen or heard monsters disguised in nineteenth-century dresses or driving a Ford Model T. Doctors who hear all this after having seen the anatomy of the brain in the hospitals of Paris, dissecting bodies in search of the anatomical formula of madness. Tragedy shapes our visible bodies, expressing itself in the shape of our backs, more or less hunched, in the gaze of our eyes, full of light or shadow, in the gestures of our hands that comb our hair in certain revealing ways. The body is the mirror, and the mirror on the wall reverses the image to speak to us so softly that almost no one hears it. Mirrors are our only friends, but they too are exposed to death. If the censors were to see themselves in the mirrors, they would shatter with a wide, oblique crack that would divide the reflected image into two incompatible zones, and there would be no reconciliation. Because the only reconciliation that exists is the darkness in which they hide. Or are they the darkness itself?
The peace of ignorance as an alternative to the endless war of knowledge. The more voices in the tumult, the less understanding. Hundreds of apartments in a building where each inhabitant shouts, banging on the walls to make the other be quiet, and the other does the same because they can't hear them, and the chain is an exquisite domino whose first piece has been pushed by the delicate finger of God.

All of this makes me think of Hamlet and the endless labyrinths where he lost his will and found eternal doubt. The poems I wrote about “Hamlet” are obviously inspired by Shakespeare’s play. I won’t speak of its importance, but rather of the way it captivated me from my first reading. I had an old, coverless edition of the play at my parents’ house, and even when, as a teenager, I tried to delve into the text, I found it very difficult but irresistibly fascinating. I don’t think I finished reading it back then, but Hamlet’s monologues attracted me with their musical quality, a blend of ballad and recitation. Sometimes I would recite aloud “ *To be or not to be* ,” or “ *How feeble is man* ,” or the gravedigger scene. Later, watching films based on it, the fascination was complete. Let’s not even talk about stagings or

adaptations, acting, or art direction. Hamlet's words endure through time, growing in meaning, multiplying their interpretations, and increasing their transcendence. For they speak of humankind and its first and last condition, of chance and the destiny of life, of death, guilt, remorse, desire and lust, cowardice, jealousy, unbridled ambition, crime, hypocrisy, love, and madness. Each character is both a symbol and a being of flesh and blood. Ghosts coexist with human beings, the fantastic is part of the non-fantastic, the barriers between sanity and madness are as unreal as the boundaries between life and death or between the real and the fictional. A play within a play exposes the reality of a crime hidden behind a facade of fiction.

These poems aim to recreate, through my own expressive means, my own concerns, and my worldview, what this work suggested to me, what its content and themes have evoked in me over time. It is not a copy of scenes, nor even a reflection upon them, but an appropriation of characters. They have changed; they have the same names, but they are different now. They have absorbed my way of thinking, my way of seeing things; they have sought out and found elements I didn't know were there. That is the function of the characters one creates or recreates in reading: to search, indirectly, like spies, like curious and intrusive guests, in the corners of the house we have inhabited since birth. Corners we remain unfamiliar with despite all these years.

Here, then, is that gaze, the world they found, recreating and recreating itself as it explores me.

They were written over many years. Some were published in literary magazines and anthologies, after Leandro persuaded me to do so, though I was never satisfied with the result. Many of them originated as corrections to old poems from my adolescence. Those have since disappeared, but as also happens with my narrative work, some ideas survive the initial forms in which they were conceived. These poems are almost contemporaneous with a long novel, and I believe they represented a way of counterbalancing the effort and attention that work demanded. The novel's long, drawn-out sentences, its dense and oppressive atmosphere, were relieved by the poems' concise and short prose. I'm still not sure of the validity of this collection, and each time I reread them, sometimes I'm satisfied, and other times I find flaws that I no

longer know how to correct without completely altering the texts. I know they are conceptual poems, where emotion tends to flow very slowly, with an almost burning coldness filtered through the intellect. The epigraph I chose for this piece is from one of my favorite poets, perhaps the one with whom I most identify, Alberto Girri. This aesthetic choice is not accidental; there is a clear intention to follow the same line of poetry, though not the style, of course, determined both by my own expressive limitations and by the boundless heights reached by my model.

I don't know if I will write poems again; I hope I will, because that is my desire. As I write this, I am dedicated to narrative, and it is there that I pour those "concepts" I previously put into poems. The paragraphs are longer than my few short stories; the action is slowed down by the interposition of reflections that tend to have an internal musicality, attempting to resemble that fluid and almost baroque rhythm of Faulknerian prose. Perhaps that's what suits my style; I can't say for sure. Faulkner said that poetry is the greatest genre, but novelists like him undoubtedly achieved a poetic flight in their prose far more effectively than many poets when writing in the format considered a poem.

Poetry is so intense to both read and write, and the work of revision is perhaps longer, more arduous, and less satisfying than that of narrative. It's difficult to reconcile both genres, and few authors, except for the most brilliant—Borges, for example, or Octavio Paz—were masters of both. Novelists sometimes tend to create poems that are primarily visual, narrative, and lacking in musicality. In turn, great poets, when they venture into narrative, usually create short stories with allegorical undertones or purely as prose poems. I'm not trying to make generalizations, only to mention examples that come to mind, undoubtedly selective and arbitrary. The structure of poetry, in my view, requires a very particular mental approach, which, while not excluding, does temporarily dismantle the forceful and well-established schemes of narrative.

To sit down and write a poem, one must forget the resources that are only valid for short stories or novels—I'm referring to those frameworks, plans, and models that architects use to design their structures. It's also something akin to superstition, or perhaps to the fear of contagious disease. While writing

poetry, one is afraid to read narrative, because what has been painstakingly achieved could collapse under the influence of those viruses called "explanation" and "argument," which tend to try to give clarity and reason to everything that is written. When writing narrative, reading poetry is neither disabling nor frightening, but if one simultaneously attempts to write poetry and narrative, the mental effort to shift between realms and atmospheres is too complicated, more exhausting than physical exertion, comparable perhaps only to the discomforts of an illness. The narrator is afraid of losing their power of fluidity, their strength of a continuous and perpetual flow of narrative consciousness, if they then begin to write poetry. Again, these are particularities arising from my personal judgment, which do not preclude considering so many other possibilities and experiences, as well as the diverse narrative and poetic forms that do not necessarily contradict each other, but rather complement one another.
Everything depends, I suppose, on the limits of personal talent, or what we call talent.
What are these limits?
There is no other option but to live, even locked in a room, as they say Emily Dickinson did, and start writing what a window grants us of the world, and allow everything that our imagination is capable of creating with that concession to emerge.

For that, austerity and silence are needed. Virtues, undoubtedly, difficult to attain. There are those who prefer unrestrained, explanatory verbosity as a way of convincing themselves of their own arguments, and others who shout and dismantle the elements of things, as if those things could prove them right or find within them the indivisible fragments of tranquility. Austerity and silence are like two high walls, or two absolutely flat fields without precise boundaries, before and within which the Furies scream without receiving any answers. Because the walls neither hear nor allow the screeching sound of their voices to pass through, nor are there any constructions on the plains to generate echoes. They only await the consequences of their cries, which will slowly and permanently erode the stones. And men strive for silence and austerity, not as objectives, but simply as a consequence of time, which engenders and ferments weariness: the only God par excellence.

The complaints are useless because they crash against the bureaucratic media landscape, be it newspapers, television, or government. Individual opinion is a scourge that corrodes the complacent complacency of demagoguery. Identity is chaos, individuality a crime. Simulation and what is socially acceptable are one and the same seed that sprouts in every desert. Boredom and disillusionment, children born old, still continue to wait for something: the ecstasy of reading in a body or in a book, or at least the painless dissolution of existence.

But from outside, every morning, the insistent barking of the many dogs unleashed by the Furies at our front doors never ceases to be heard. There are dogs inside, too, who look at us as if searching for something we cannot give them, and we are content with their daily food and the constant demands for loyalty and submission. Obedience and love are one and the same when it comes to them, so we unleash them against the beasts outside, or they simply go out and fight, and when they return, wounded and defeated, if they return at all, we chain them up as a sign of penance. We will give them neither food nor water until they learn to discern reality: if they go out, it will be to win, because to lose, they would be better off staying home, under the bed, or curled up between the sheets, until man and dog tire of stillness and move until they bite each other. Man bites with his hands, the dog bites with his fear. The fear of the dog is food for strength, the fear of man is food for fury.

The Furies are not women, though they are often depicted as such. They are enigmas. They are said to have snakes in their hair, but the truth is that they sometimes have the bodies of dogs. The fact is, they change their forms according to the vengeance they contemplate. And vengeance for moral offenses is the worst in its execution, because it usually does not rely on bloodshed, cruelty, or slaughter. It uses the power of guilt.

It is said that remorse is the worst punishment, and those who contradict this statement are the ones who yearn to punish others. The Furies do not represent justice, but vengeance, and guilt is a vengeance that never ends. Guilt does not disappear even with oblivion. Time and space take care of that: the place of an event, the time of a regrettable occurrence. What has been done does not vanish. What the eyes did not see, the gaze of the man's heart

saw: the heartbeats in a given space of time mark, like Braille dots, the writing of guilt.

Faced with guilt, silence is the answer. Words obscure what they explain, while dogs speak more accurately with their barks. The cry of a desperate man sounds much like a mournful bark. Let us listen carefully to that man who tries to commit suicide by cutting his wrists with a knife. He has screamed, he has warned, and in the spilled blood he finds justification for his desperate search for solace. He knows that solace does not exist, and is merely a caress that postpones the relief of pain. Emotional anesthesia, the academic experts would say, without university degrees, speaking on television programs during the afternoons when men and women let the vision of their lives slip by for hours on end, hours that accumulate in the attics of the useless.

And one day, they go up to clean, to make room because another child has arrived, or because there's no money and they'll rent it out. All this to avoid saying they're looking for the cause of their boredom. On the sloping ceiling of the attic there are hooks for hanging bicycles, and when they open the door, the dampness greets them with images of cattle swaying in a refrigerator, or dogs hanged while the eldest son stares at his parents, leaning against the doorframe, wondering when that son was born.

A hook is a question mark.

It invites you to look, and the imagination explodes into a multitude of forms that it abhors, yet cling like memories. And then there's no turning back: the scribbles on the paper, marking the accelerated beating of the heart, become barks that gradually take on an irregular rhythm. But the irregularity of the rhythm also possesses a harmony that translates into any musical system: classical, atonal, dodecaphonic. Or perhaps the closest thing is, in the end, the sad minimalism that, with its casual and naive rhythm at the beginning, becomes an unyielding and invincible obsession.

They, the Furies, feed on that.

How could they see into the heart of man if they weren't already inside it? Guilt is not learned or betrayed in sentimental glances of clouded eyes, nor in foul words, nor in gestures or more or less characteristic behaviors: anger or submission.

Guilt knows itself and transforms into what mythology, eager for symbols to explain the unconscious, calls enraged women, because few things are as graphic as a woman with her gestures and curses, even when she is not angry, even when she is not enraged. Women's peace is not silence but their voice, and few men manage to discern the difference. Women with snakes in their hair, because they are responsible for sin. Women with tears of blood, because blood is their constant opposite.
But women with the bodies of dogs? That's harder to imagine. Dogs bite, they overwhelm. Dogs bark, they cut with their tongues.
The Furies are not women, they are enigmas.
They have dogs to guide them, for they are blind and see darkness where there is light, and they find light in the deepest pits of the human heart. There, where the scent is tolerable only to them, who have no sense of smell, and where the sound of the larvae's rustling is so exquisite that only their ears can perceive it. But they need the dogs to lead them to where the scent is most intense, and then they set them free. The dogs flee if they are female, or attack if they are male. Only they will face the ignominious battle with Guilt. They do not know that they will die after being torn to pieces by the countless tentacles of Medusa.
The Furies, however, will not be discouraged. The dogs of wrath never run out; multiples are born in each litter: every guilty act breeds as many as will later die.
They, the Furies, are the beautiful police officers of vengeance. In their uniforms of scales, blood, and death, they direct the traffic of the feedback loop between birth and death. The bestial opening of life and the tearing apart of flesh in death.
Dogs born from the human heart and then hanging in the dirty attics of the mind.
The brain-heart circuit is God's most splendid achievement.
The perfect circle.

I have dreamed, on many nights when I had a fever—if I haven't already said so, I've hinted at it countless times, because my insistence on illness and the body is nothing more than the impotence of my uncertainty: I am sick, and I

think I always have been; my body is a wound that sometimes hurts and other times terrifies me—I have dreamed, as I said, of what I consider my best literary ideas, or at least the ones I like best, those that come closest to the innermost recesses of my consciousness. When I've tried to uproot them, I couldn't, and that's why I attribute roots to them in that realm I've spoken of so often.

Literature, then, is like a woman with a fever. You have to embrace her and rock her, hold her tight and wipe the sweat from her brow. You also have to brush the hair away from her flushed, vibrant face from time to time. But above all, you have to listen to what she tells us, the stories of the worlds she visits. Those marvelous worlds that health, that selfish old woman with withered flesh, tries to hide from us until the day we die.

We writers must take on this task because no one else will. Those who work the land know the pain of the body bent over the darkness at the bottom of the wells. Fishermen can feel the fear in every wave of every cloudy evening, and the fear growing from the sea like an invisible monster that can be felt with the unseen hands of fate. Doctors can see the disconnect between the soul and pure anatomy, when weariness turns to cynicism and the affront to human dignity shatters even faith, so innocent and ignorant that it evokes pity. And they, the doctors, build panaceas from these fragments, utopias that everyone calls despair, except them, until the day of their own death. And what will lawyers see? The recesses of the Law, the sinister caves behind the walls of the Justice building, where the pains that cannot be destroyed hide. The skeleton of the courts is held up by the substance of blood, coagulated, then dried, then diluted again, but already infamous from the tears and perspiration of the demented, the disabled, and the desperate. Outside them, the world is a desert, without horns, with empty buses stopped in the middle of the street, with sidewalks where only the wind and the files that have fallen from the high windows of government buildings pass.

We are the ones who find the words to describe the disease. We cannot cure it, nor even diagnose it, of course. We can only describe it in order to recreate it in another form that can be understood: doctors will appreciate the meticulousness of observation, and lawyers will rejoice at finally giving meaning to their seals and waxed envelopes.

A blight like clotted blood on each of the files piled up in the vast archives of the courts. Closed cases, dead cases. A name isn't a resolution, but sometimes it offers some solace. The doctors know it, and they resign themselves to it. The lawyers know it, and they smoke, dreaming of heaven. The fishermen return to the dock with one less crew member. The farmers return hunched over to their homes, hoping to die before morning.
And the maids see, in their masters' bathrooms, Death, hungover, who came to visit them that night, sitting on the toilet, trousers down, arms dangling between her open legs, head bowed on her chest. Death belching and cursing amidst drunken whimpers . The scythe propped against the sink faucets, while the water runs endlessly, disappearing into long underground passages.
Literature is that, I think. Crying when you should laugh, laughing when you should lament. Literature is the ambivalence of error, the mistake taken to its extreme, exponentially multiplying it not with the ease of a square root, but with the slowness of a mentally challenged person adding zero after zero to a primitive number that was difficult for them to write at the beginning of a blank notebook. Digit after digit, the number grows, and they don't know it; that's why the sum of their exponential writing only plunges them deeper into the ever-more desperate abyss of the irremediable. It is nothing other than ignorance, or the wisdom of catastrophe, that drags our hand toward the zeros that multiply the error.
Corrections are incorrections.
Failures are crimes.
The cure is a disease.

I've seen her approaching on the opposite sidewalk, while I was writing in my sickbed, my leg a mangled corpse beneath the bandages. I've seen her pass by hundreds of times on the sidewalk in front of the third-floor apartment where I live. I've leaned out of my balcony window to watch her go by, because she's so easy to recognize.
She's an old blind woman, her cane broken into fine splinters at the end where she rests her hand, but she doesn't mind them digging into her skin. She walks blindly, though she turns her head toward the shop windows, as if admiring the dresses, the sweets and breads, the displayed books and the lit

television screens. She talks to the people she passes, even though they're meters away and can't hear her. She waves from afar to the empty buses, to the guard's booth on the corner who's been dead for two years, to the newspaper vendor whose stand is closed like a metal coffin.

Health imagines not to suffer, and therefore does not suffer. But it doesn't even imagine; it sees what it doesn't see, hears what it doesn't hear, and touches what it cannot touch, like that dog that barks at it and that it chases away because it is afraid of reality.

I've laughed at her many times, of course, when I'm alone and Bernardo is still at the hospital until late at night. I know she thinks about me, and on his nights on call she calls me and we talk, and sometimes I've told her about the old woman. "She's the one on the fourth floor," he tries to explain, "she's blind and doesn't want the operation." But I doubt she's the same one I'm describing. It doesn't matter, I answer, don't worry, and I hang up. I look out the balcony again; it's already dark, and she's still wandering around, going into a bar to chat, because the shops have already closed. A skinny dog that doesn't bark follows her, but she keeps yelling at it to be quiet, and people laugh at her and her gestures. She moves her arms and strokes her cane against the dog. Her hand is bleeding, but she doesn't notice. Sometimes I've seen her bandaged, but not today. The cane is stained, like a sword that has turned against its owner. Perhaps the splinters are embedded in his hand and have become part of his bones after so much time. And the cane is part of his skeleton.

The dog won't leave because it resents her. It doesn't ask for food; it simply follows her, persistent as only a dog can be . The old woman doesn't give up trying to push it away. She doesn't really see or hear it, but she smells it. Health knows what lies beneath cleanliness; it knows the inhabitants beneath the skin. It smells filth, even when it tries to fill its nose with street smog and the rot of vacant lots.

I pity her, and I close the window, then lower the blinds and remain in darkness. I turn on a light by my bed. Tonight I will be alone, and I can wander, at the expense of my sorrows, through the marvelous worlds that she, the old woman, cannot see, no matter how many times she wanders around the same neighborhood, chasing away ghosts and battling extinct empires.

Tonight, I will see the strange rites of death, the immeasurable worlds of darkness made of thousands of gray skies. I will hear the cries of despair and the curses of anger. I will see the Furies unleashing the dogs in a white nursery. I will smell the spilled blood, the expelled blood, the blood preserved in plastic jars for millennia. Until the world is the same: the circle of time like a snake biting its own tail, trying to devour itself by closing the circle until it reaches the smallest possible size: the one determined by its own body.
He cannot get rid of that body, just as I cannot get rid of mine.
Death will remain, tired and drunk, sitting in a fourth-floor bathroom, waiting for the maid, who, like a god, will arrive to clean up the excrement from her orgy.

PERÓN IN MATADEROS

I reminisce as I write, sitting in my wooden chair with an old cushion that still seems to offer comfort, though I lack the courage to disabuse it of that notion. The typewriter has paused to allow my fingers to rest, and I turn my head toward the balcony window. People are passing by on the opposite sidewalk: a boy is nearly hit by a bus, a mother is arguing with the driver, passengers are

complaining about the delay, and horns blare and echo from the stuck cars. I listen to the conversations of the building's residents who have leaned out onto their balconies. It's midday, and everyone is out on the street: children from school, men from offices, women out shopping.

I glance back at the typewriter, and the din of the street blurs and transforms, I don't know why, into the memory ingrained in my bones, rising to my hands. But before typing, I look at them and think of my father and his habit of stroking my head with his left hand while I sat on his lap, my back against his chest. Our eyes were always fixed on the same spot: the light streaming through the door of the house in Mataderos where we lived until I was ten. It was a Sunday afternoon ritual, sometimes in silence, other times with him telling me stories that were almost always the same, altered by that eloquence that always made what he recounted sound new. But I pretended not to remember and said nothing, just as I had learned to ignore his right hand.

Mom would sit in a chair on the sidewalk drinking mate, and she'd turn around to look at us, inviting us in. But my father was withdrawn and self-absorbed. She had told me that he hadn't always been like that. I asked her when it started, and she looked at me, as if testing my understanding, and said: " *Since shortly before you were born* ."

Later, when I learned to distinguish between my parents' personalities, I was able to place each piece in the strange puzzle that constitutes the fabric of every family. My mother was extroverted, but extremely distrustful. She had been raised in an environment of public school teachers, subjected to the hardships of end-of-month hunger and the long, almost always fruitless waits in hospitals, while she read books she borrowed from the neighborhood library and sometimes returned, sometimes didn't, because the librarian turned a blind eye to this little girl who was barely over ten years old and reading Sartre or Marx. Did she understand anything? I knew she did when I heard her talking while stirring the pot, waiting for my father to come home from work, and while I did my homework at the kitchen table.

She was thin, with straight, ash-blonde hair that she tied in a messy ponytail, sometimes with small clumps of flour that had come off her hands, which had been kneading dough a little while before.

She was outgoing and smiling, but she also got flustered by my father's ambiguous and innocent remarks. Because he was different, shy at times, overly trusting most of the time, with an angelic face that charmed the seamstresses and the shopkeepers, according to my mother, but who let himself be deceived by his coworkers, by the mechanics who fixed the old Fiat every other day, or by the government itself.

Perón was president at that time. I hadn't been born yet; I was in my mother's womb, seven months pregnant. The country was a blatant contradiction, as she would say at the dinner table. He was coming home from the slaughterhouse where he had worked for fifteen years. My father was thirty or thirty-one; he had started very young, but he had never risen higher than section chief when someone else was absent because they had cut their fingers or been fired. That was what my mother criticized him for: his complacency, his lack of daring. She wasn't a Peronist; on the contrary, she abhorred what she called demagoguery and hypocrisy. She would read the morning paper at the butcher shop or the general store while she shopped, or sometimes, when she had time, she would sit in a bar and read books that she piled on the table until nightfall, when she would look at the clock with the Cinzano advertisement on the grimy wall and be shocked at how late it was. Her husband would be returning from work and dinner wasn't ready yet.

My father, however, went back and forth to the slaughterhouse without complaint. I very rarely heard him grumble as he held my hand while he walked me home from school, when he picked me up after work. I was the last one left waiting, sitting on a school bench, after all the other children had already been collected. I would watch him approaching along the sidewalk, at first anxiously, then resignedly, and later hoping he would be late, because he was reading a book the teacher had lent me. I would see him arrive, slightly hunched over, his overalls stained with blood.

What was happening at the municipal slaughterhouse? I knew very well; my father had taken me to watch from the gate: the men coming and going, laden

with cattle on their backs, the metal hooks clanking like chains from Dante's Inferno, the smell of blood, sometimes sweet, sometimes sour, and the way the grease permeated the whole place, as if it stained the light with a thick, slippery vapor in which it was easy to get lost and fall. Who could be sure, I wondered, that some random axe wouldn't mistake the frail flesh of a man for the innocent meat of a cow? Size was lost in the vapors of that grease, a kind of lubricant that eased the path to the saddest parts of a man: the memory that merges with tragedy.

But my father would arrive at the school door, clap, and the gatekeeper would open it reluctantly and angrily.

- How are you, Mrs. Eufemia?

And the other one avoided him without answering, with the disgust I sensed as I gathered my things and walked down the dark hallway toward the light of the sidewalk, where my father's body stood as a bastion denying sorrow and abandonment, but whose essence I didn't understand. The smell of blood brought back memories of axes and the noise of chainsaws that could be heard from several blocks away. My father was a worker of hell, a bearer of the crime of custom. But his gaze was that of a guardian angel. That's how I felt his hand when we walked home together, greeting neighbors and shopkeepers here and there, letting the afternoon slip by as one lets life slip by, arms crossed in doorways.

He wasn't a Peronist; he just went along with what the majority thought, like everyone did back then, or like those with a lot to lose almost always do. His ideas, when he expressed them in our kitchen, were similar to manna, even though he couldn't explain them properly. However, his personality made them diametrically opposed, and what I initially thought was a contradiction was simply the complementary effect of the attraction of feelings. He spoke almost in a whisper, sometimes after bringing a forkful of twisted noodles to his mouth. He considered all aspects of politics: he justified the unions, understood the president's intentions, and grudgingly tolerated the machinations and what my mother called the rulers' lusts. From the president, he'd say, to the factory foreman, everyone thinks only of themselves. Was she a communist back then? I believe she was a free thinker,

and in any era of fanaticism and authoritarianism, boundaries are easily blurred, which is why they're categorized by the government in power like someone arranging the furniture in a house. Doors are bricked up, stains are covered up, and holes in the floor are hidden.

My father, however, was naive. For my mother, those were the most dangerous, and perhaps that's why she had fallen in love, like opposites attracting, or perhaps because her extroverted courage complemented her husband's apparent passivity. Sometimes I wondered if it was a relationship of protector and protected, if my mother's intellectual superiority—which also made her rebellious and sometimes cold, scolding, and intolerant—dominated my father's composure and submissiveness. But in him I came to glimpse, as she must have on those nights when the world vanished and the bed they shared was an island in the middle of an ocean ravaged by hunger and war, my father's inner struggle: eyes that barely wept, with the unyielding anguish of someone who has always known he was defeated, but whose failure was a weapon he had honed for years and years, in every spare moment granted to the servants. Was that the edge of his knives in the slaughterhouse? Whose flesh was he cutting? The sacrificial ram, or perhaps the mock regicide?

My mother could read the anger in her husband's eyes. Beneath the mere trappings of submission and the lamb's crisp wool, the anger was akin to an idea as powerful as those expressed in philosophy and politics books. It was stronger, she knew, at least in that moment and circumstance, whether it lasted an hour or several years, as the Constitution and the whims of men dictated. My father's eyes shone in the darkness, especially during that time. She told me this with a sorrow that wounded me as we slept our brief siesta before the afternoon's hustle and bustle. I felt the love she had for her husband in that sadness which is the essence of love. Joy is fleeting; sadness is the unbreakable *continuum* , that which endures and gives it meaning.

I imagine him speaking in those days, barely lifting his eyes from his plate, shy of his wife's gaze, whom he considered more intelligent. His hair was curly and dark, with stiff curls that flowed into his beard, which he barely bothered to shave when he got home, because he would get up at four in the morning and leave with just a couple of cups of mate in his stomach and a loaf

of bread that he would tear apart and eat as he walked to the slaughterhouse. His dark beard, several days old, his breath smelling of tobacco, his body with broad arms and a bristling chest, and the innocent gaze of a destructive angel.

Around that time, Perón's visit to the Mataderos neighborhood had been announced. The neighbors were thrilled, my mother told me. It was all anyone talked about in every shop she visited, and they'd stop her on the sidewalk to boast about this extraordinary visit, because they knew her ideas and what she thought of the government, all of which went against the prevailing popular opinion of the time. She kept quiet and listened with resignation, because after the first argument she realized it was pointless to go home with tired arms after carrying shopping bags during an hour-long discussion.

The president's presence was intended to counter the rumors circulating in the press regarding several issues involving the municipal slaughterhouse. It had all begun several months earlier, during the summer, when the body of a prostitute was found among the remains of cattle being taken to the crematorium. Apparently, the truck driver hauling the bones and bags of rotten meat started shooing away the barking dogs that were trying to get their hands on anything falling from the truck, and they began to fight. It wasn't unusual, of course, but they were blocking the way, so he tried to shoo them away with kicks and sticks. But one dog stared at him, clutching what appeared to be a human head in its teeth. They say the truck driver looked all around, and seeing no one, tried to approach the dog, perhaps to grab it and get rid of it. But the animal ran off with its prey. A few minutes later, the neighborhood watchman arrived with two others. They had killed the dog and were carrying a black bag. They threw her on the ground near the truck and emptied her, the dog's teeth still clamped against one side of her head. The truck driver bent down and sawed off the animal's jaw.

He wasn't the usual guard, the old man who'd been watching the cattle coming and going for twenty years, pot-bellied, tired, and smoking the expensive cigarettes he bought with bribes. Nothing would have happened

then. This was someone else, younger, with a clean uniform, thin, and with a lot of hair under his cap.

An ambulance from the morgue arrived, along with more police officers, and the slaughterhouse was closed for the entire weekend. On Monday, the press announced the discovery of the dismembered body of an elderly prostitute. They had known her for a long time because she frequented the neighborhood every night, and those who saw her dressed as a housewife in the afternoons, buying things to prepare dinner for the son who waited for her at the boarding house on Charcas Street, knew who she was. But they also knew that the boy resembled a stupid monkey, barely able to walk, and when he did, it was only to run away and disappear for two or three days, before the police brought him back covered in filth and saliva.

In the end, she was a prostitute, and the matter faded into oblivion. They said the boy was taken to an orphanage. I once asked my mother what might have become of him. She looked at me strangely, but she knew I was curious about such things. She shrugged and said, "They must have taken him to a circus."

Then, at the beginning of winter, other problems arose for the slaughterhouse and the government that supported it. The bigwigs, as the president called them, of the Rural Society, had denounced some shady dealings in the ministry's business. Certain suppliers were being favored at the expense of those who, for over a hundred years, had offered the best agricultural products. That's what they said, that's what they objected to. It was no use. The opposition press went to great lengths to attack the government every day: they published reliable figures, and from the Senate benches there were protests and heated debates. The large landowners were not intimidated by the expenses of their campaign, and so the president was advised to reconnect with the people, from whom, if not estranged by sentiment, he had certainly grown weary due to the lack of closer contact. Sometimes a worker needs to see that the man they worship isn't a god, but also a man with arthritis in his hands and cavities in his teeth that smile at him. And then he endures a little longer. One gets tired of God, like one gets tired of repeating things to a deaf person, but one renews one's faith in a man who watches over them and suffers.

That was what my mother didn't understand, absorbed as she was in her ideologies and social theories. Her emotions had to pass through her brain first before touching her heart. And the reverse process was incomprehensible to her, a cause of havoc and disaster. She justified the violence of revolutions based on well-reasoned premises, but war waged from the heart seemed stupid to her, and war born of ambition, like that of all those politicians, ignominious.

The week before Perón's arrival, some sidewalks and the facades of houses along his planned route were repaired. The municipal building and the front of the slaughterhouse were painted, because little could be done inside except fill in certain holes and brick up doors whose destinations few knew.

Was my father happy? He wasn't a supporter; whoever was in government didn't matter much to him. He shared his colleagues' joy, whether sincere or not, simply going with the flow. I listened to my mother's increasingly heated tirades during dinner as the appointed day drew closer; since she couldn't take it out on the neighbors, she vented on my father.

"It's going to be bad for you," he told her, chewing as he spoke. She was heavily pregnant, and that outburst wasn't doing her any good.

Mom stared at the ceiling, as if lamenting once again the ignorance of men. She didn't worry about the blocks she had to walk with the heavy shopping bags, nor the arguments over haggling, nor the uneven sidewalks or the buses that didn't respect her when crossing, nor the effort she exerted washing clothes or the swelling in her legs after hours of cleaning or standing next to a hot oven. None of that affected her condition; only talking and getting angry did. But my mother's words were wise because they were pregnant with unborn books, discourses that my father recognized, and that is perhaps why he was so reserved in her presence, the submission of one who knows himself to be intellectually inferior, but still dares to love the body and heart of the one who speaks to him in this way; and her mind, well, that's another matter. One can love another's intelligence, fall in love with it, but that mind will respond with a logic devoid of all unreason. Admiration might be more appropriate, but sometimes it's as cold as it is indifferent. My mother's mind, however, loved after reasoning, and that's why that love was

so sincere and scarce, not in intensity, but in quantity. She loved my father not as someone she had to teach or protect, but as his opposite. She saw him, perhaps, standing on the peak of one mountain, from the peak of another. The chasm between them was unbridgeable, certainly, but sometimes unity doesn't need a physical bond, but simply identification.

From opposite sides of the table, they spoke little, gazing silently most of the time, admiring each other and then falling into a path of mutual understanding. A table separated them like hundreds of kilometers of snow and rocks. A flimsy wooden table that could easily be smashed to pieces. But they wouldn't dream of destroying the unbreakable bond that united them.

The day arrived, and little had been prepared to the organizers' liking. The platform where the president would deliver his speech was only half-finished that morning, and government officials had to be brought in. The press seats were meager, as had been decided. Only the national broadcast and journalists from the official press would be allowed. We were just another neighborhood in the federal capital, but it almost felt like a separate municipality far from the center. Indifference and neglect did more than distance, my mother would say, watching from the doorway, her arms crossed over her stomach, her kitchen apron crumpled into a ball in her hands. She watched people pass by with mockery and disdain, getting her revenge for her husband being forced that morning to get up even earlier, to shower and shave when he didn't feel like it—he'd even cut himself with the razor when he'd dozed off in front of the mirror. She heard the swearing from the bed and got up. She saw the cut, bandaged it, and kissed him. No, she wasn't angry that he had to go.

The streets were packed by midday. The organizers had managed to put up barriers along the curbs so the official car could pass, with Perón waving from the window. Mama saw the president's car go by, and the president himself, his arm out the window, his expression the same as always, when a space opened up among the people leaning against the wooden barriers. He looked old and tired. He missed his wife, probably, but she had done much more for the country after she died. That was what almost everyone thought, even if no

one admitted it. The car continued on its way to the slaughterhouse, where work had stopped and the workers, clean and tidy, waited in uniform rows like schoolchildren. Her husband was among them, without a flag or any sign of merit or distinction. He was just one more, but she could still picture him in the distance, blocks away, behind the walls where the cattle that fueled the country's ambitions were being slaughtered.

The car had arrived at the gate, and the journalists approached the president respectfully, but the bodyguards pushed them back. Many photos were taken, but only a few were later published in the press. Perón wasn't very tall, barely of average height, somewhat hunched over now, and with dark circles under his eyes that didn't suit him. He was losing power, and this act was one of the classic gasps of a drowning man. Leaving the Casa Rosada, walking the streets and sidewalks of a neighborhood he had already forgotten, entering a filthy building where blood smeared the walls and bones were piled in the corners. Where the smell of bleach was pervasive every hour of every day of the year. And where the men weren't men but animals who spoke and listened, and that's why they did what they did. The men for whom he had supposedly risen to the highest office in the nation, and for whom he was said to have signed laws, issued decrees, proposed improvements, and forced many to do what they didn't want to do to benefit many others who also didn't know what they wanted. If only they knew, perhaps the president thought as he greeted each of the slaughterhouse workers individually. He felt the calluses on their hands. He saw their smiles—ambiguous at times, naive at others, ecstatic most of the time—when he looked them in the eye and smiled that legendary smile captured in hundreds of photos and films. The trembling of the workers who finally had before them the man they said was the only one in history who had worked for them.

And when he arrived where my father was, perhaps he felt the strength of his hands, or perhaps the organizers thought it was time to end that courtesy visit on a friendly note, and they found in Dad the typical worker: young, strong, and with manly features.

Then Perón, after shaking her hand and without letting go or ceasing to smile, asked her:

-What job do you do, my friend?

Later, when my father told Mom every step of what had happened, she laughed at the obviousness of the question.

-Carneo…sir…president.

Nobody laughed until Perón did.

"No 'Mr. President,' my friend. Here, I'm just one of you. Call me Perón..."

"Yes, sir... I mean..." my father tried to say.

Don't worry, my friend. And what's your name?

-Benjamin Tejada, sir…Perón.

Those escorting the president smiled at each other, and the workers looked at them.

-I imagine he must have been the youngest in his family, or am I wrong?

-No, sir… I am the youngest of nine brothers, all of them boys.

Perón raised his arms and almost shouted, jubilantly:

"Look, my dears, what this young man means to the country! A working man, a model of family and work ethic. It's for people like him that we've fought for years and years. If my Eva could see you, my friend, she'd want to meet your wife and children, because I assume you have them, don't you?"

The president was all jokes and cheerfulness, and this familiarity was beginning to worry his escorts. Their concern turned serious when they heard the president say he wanted to visit the workers' house.

“But Mr. President,” a man in a gray suit whispered in Perón’s ear. “What the hell, I know what I’m doing.” The president was riding a wave of popularity, or perhaps trying to regain it. Many said at the time that it wasn’t just the case opened by the Rural Society’s accusations, but the roots that were

spreading dangerously into the government, into his own home, and what was worse, into the image history would have of him. Was that precisely what worried him? As one ages, there is a decline in the practical and immediate, which are the fruits of strength and youth, and the idealism of an adolescent who desires much and can do little reappears. But the idealism of old age is aware of its end, and therefore makes no more of an impact than someone striking at nothing.

-But sir, I am not worthy that you should enter my house.

Those were my father's exact words. My mother wouldn't let me forget them, because in her opinion they were legendary. The mixture of sarcasm and naiveté they represented in that situation, and especially considering the person they were directed at, made her admire, and therefore love, my father even more. It confirmed for her what she had known from many others before: that my father's intelligence was intuitive, and she was able to appreciate something perhaps greater than the wisdom of reason gleaned from books—poetic intelligence.

They say Perón was initially speechless, but then quickly reacted by raising his hands again and embracing my father. The photographs reveal that embrace as the president's swan song: the most representative symbol of his entire political life.

The collaborators exchanged unsure what to do when they heard the response. Arrest the worker? Absolutely not. Censor the entire conversation in the press, of course. But how could they force all the other workers to keep quiet? And who could say that no one had overheard from the street? There were kids wandering around unsupervised, and they'd soon be repeating everything at home.

My mother told me all this with pride. “ Imagine ,” she’d say, “a laborer repeating those words to a man who, in his prime, had fought with the clergy to the point of burning churches in those years. But what else could he do but go along with your father? He was an old man cornered. Getting angry would have been like putting his head on the chopping block to be cut off prematurely by the opposition or the military, who were already on the verge

of doing so. He did the smartest thing: he hid in the crowd, which he always thought would save him, but he was too different to go unnoticed. A wolf isn’t welcome in the flock, no matter how much he disguises himself as a sheep. They can smell the difference.”

"Come on, my friend," Perón said, putting an arm around my father's shoulders.

"Are you going to walk, Mr. President?" asked the same man in the gray suit.

Perón reconsidered.

- Does he live very far away, my friend?

-Seven blocks away, sir...

Perón laughed. He looked up at the sky above the open courtyard of the slaughterhouse. It was cold but clear.

-Let's walk, my friend.

They all looked at each other nervously, but the entourage began its sort of procession through the streets. The police officers moved aside the people who were more curious than ecstatic. They didn't understand what was happening. Various rumors began to circulate on the sidewalks. Some said my father would be decorated, others that he would be arrested, but no one knew the reasons, so they invented them, and these were passed on to the press the next day.

They arrived home. My mother had already gone inside and was sitting at the kitchen table mending one of my father's shirts. She had heard the commotion a few minutes earlier but ignored it. When she looked up at the front door, she saw him come in and began to say something, her face flushed, but suddenly she saw the bodyguards enter the kitchen and search the cupboards and look under the table. They even took her sewing basket with the needles. She was frightened and thought it was a robbery, and then she saw Perón come in with his ever-present smile and approach her,

extending his hand. She was speechless, but reacted by silently returning the greeting. Perón took her hand and kissed it obsequiously.

-I beg your pardon a thousand times for this lack of respect for your home, my dear lady, but these are measures to which this position, to which my beloved people have led me, obliges me.

"Okay," she said, still shy and surprised. She was probably already thinking about how to reprimand her husband.

“I asked your husband to bring me to your home, and I see that you carry the hope of our nation within you, madam. I am immensely proud of the working class. Look, gentlemen,” she said, turning to the journalists who had entered. “Observe what our efforts of so many years have achieved. It almost resembles a bourgeois home…”

My parents' house wasn't a factory worker's house, as workers were usually stereotyped. It was a house with a small front patio filled with plants and flowers, a low fence for the car we didn't own, and a porch with a column supporting a colonial-style tiled roof. Inside, there was a dining table with twelve chairs, cabinets with plates and decorations brought from Mar del Plata, and family photos. The kitchen was small, and besides the bedroom, there was a room they were preparing for when I was born. Behind it was a larger back patio with a half-finished grill and a lemon and a kumquat tree . A cat wandered around the kitchen, but it ran away when the men came in. What surprised the president, apparently, were the dozens of books piled on the kitchen table next to the sewing basket, the television, and the meticulous cleanliness with which my mother maintained the wooden floors.

It was not the ordinary home of state workers that populist propaganda insisted on proclaiming, nor was it the one that the opposition insisted on slandering.

Perón knew he was making a mistake with every decision he made, but getting by was his objective and his reason for being that day. Deviating from the established protocol was sometimes necessary, it seemed, he was telling himself.

"And what will the future Argentine be called?" he asked my mother.

Everyone was probably expecting to hear her say Juan or Eva, and ask for the sponsorship.

-If it's a girl, Cecilia; if it's a boy, Ricardo.

Perón was no longer surprised. He looked at the walls for religious symbols that might explain the answer my father had given him a little while earlier, but he didn't see any. Instead, he found books on philosophy and Marxism on the table.

The president laughed, stretched out his arms, and placed his hands on my mother's shoulders.

"I am proud of independent and strong women; they remind me of Eve. You are the ideal partners for us men who are building this country."

He waited for a response, but there was nothing.

-I know you don't like me, ma'am.

Some coughed, and the burst of flashes broke the silence.

"Mr. President," Mom replied. "I haven't asked you to come into my house, but you're welcome like anyone else. I don't turn anyone away, no matter how different their opinions may be."

- And what do you think of me?

I don't know what my father was doing while he was listening, maybe he wanted to escape from the kitchen like the cat.

-That you are a well-intentioned man, but badly advised.

It was the mildest thing he could find in his entire mental library, without betraying his ideologies too much.

Perón sat down and invited her to do the same.

"I would like to have a long conversation with you, madam, but you'll understand that these aren't the circumstances. However, if you have some tea, I would be grateful."

The president took off his overcoat and wiped the sweat from his brow. The man in the gray suit approached, looking concerned, and whispered something in his ear. Perón gestured his way away and watched as my mother searched for the cup and saucer from the antique Portuguese set she had inherited from my grandmother. Perón lifted the cup delicately, and my mother feared those large hands might break the handle.

"Beautiful," Perón said. His eyes were shining.

Did he have a fever? Was he excited? Was he sincere? These were the questions my mother asked herself, while she waited for the water to heat up and looked at my father who was sitting with his hands folded on the tablecloth, looking from one to the other in succession.

She brought the teapot and poured the water. Then she removed the tea leaves and sat down again.

"English tea," Perón said, seriously.

She nodded.

"Are you a member, mate?" he asked my father. My father looked up, surprised. He waited a few seconds, perhaps hoping Mom would get him out of the predicament.

-No, sir…

"And how is that?" He turned around and ordered the gray man to approach. The man asked:

- Weren't you invited to join when you started working?

-I've been working here for over fifteen years, sir, since I started...let's say...you...

"I know, I wasn't there..." Then she spoke quietly for a few seconds with the man in gray. My parents looked at each other in silence, probably blaming one another.

"My friend," Perón said, "it was a complete oversight on the part of the ruling class. If you had been a member, things could be very different."

She was about to get up when my mother couldn't stop herself from speaking.

- So you don't like what you see?

Perón put his overcoat back on with the help of the other man, then his gloves, and said:

"I see a bourgeois home, madam, and an exquisite education. Congratulations."

She patted my father on the back and left the house, followed by her entire entourage. Some journalists wanted to interview my parents, but my mother turned them away and locked the door. She lowered the blinds and closed the windows for the rest of the day and night. They sat at the kitchen table, his right hand clasped in her left. In complete silence, as the darkness of evening gradually enveloped the house, which remained dark until the early hours of the following morning. The doorbell rang and the doorbell was knocked on many times. No one answered. Some said they saw them leave, others that they had been overcome with emotion. The neighbors who had previously mocked them now finally had reason to respect them.

That was the story my mother told me. She referred to it several times, but only once did she end up crying. My father had already died, and she remembered it with immense sorrow. Much later, I learned that two months after that visit, my father severed almost his entire right hand with an axe. A new coworker, whom no one knew and, according to some, was a hired hand, was breaking bones. The wooden handle broke, and the axe fell blade-first onto my father's hand, who was standing right next to him working with

hides. That's what he explained, or what he was told, because he was in too much pain to remember exactly how it happened. They took him to the infirmary, where there was nothing but dirty bandages. Then to the hospital, where they stitched up the stump. The wound didn't heal for a long time; that's how they found out that Dad was diabetic, and I inherited my condition from him.

His hand required multiple surgeries, and he was in and out of the hospital more than ten times, until he refused further operations. He was laid off without pay, and shortly afterward, he received his dismissal notice.

He complained to the union many times, but they just kept giving him the runaround, until he got tired of that too. He wrote letters to Perón, reminding him of his visit to his house. He typed them with his left hand because my mother refused to type them for him. He never received a reply, just as he never recovered from the feeling of being useless while my mother worked as a maid, at first, and then as a teacher after she graduated from night school.

Nor did he ever lose the anger reflected in his eyes, eyes that held no forgiveness and rarely offered caresses. And when they did, it was a memory as bitter as blood.

THEORY OF WARS

I've been asked how I began writing the novel about the war—the motives, the seed, the initial inspiration for the plot—and all those questions that people usually ask at a literary reading in a café, a conference, or a book presentation. Or simply on the street, when we run into someone we haven't seen in a long time, who greets us right there on the sidewalk as we rush to complete some errand before the government offices or banks slam the door in our faces. But this person has such a jovial face, and seems so happy to see us again, that we don't have the nerve to leave them hanging with a mere listless greeting and the hypocritical smile of someone who hides behind work and time. Around us, hundreds of people pass by, sometimes even bumping into us; the air is freezing, because it's winter, and the cold wind, heavy with tiny droplets of moisture, seeps between our necks and scarves, numbing the fingers we're holding two or three books.

They, the books, have betrayed us. The person who stops us plunges into the memory of old days of writing workshops, of people who have died leaving behind unusable poems in photocopied pamphlets or neighborhood magazines that lasted only one issue, or at most two. “Do you remember how much it

cost us to gather subscribers?” he asks us. Of course we remember, so much so that we paid for the only issue out of our own pockets. And then comes the useless, but therefore inevitable, question: “Are you still writing?”
Lying doesn't mean getting rid of the nuisance of standing there in the cold, subject to the verbal clutches of someone we barely remember. So we answer truthfully, and realize we've fallen into the trap we always try to avoid, but which somehow attracts us like honey: talking about literature and books, and above all, about ourselves. Who else will we talk to? Our colleagues at work look at us like we're weirdos if we bring up the subject, and reluctantly accept a poem scribbled on a napkin as a sample, which will soon turn up crumpled in a wastebasket next to the desk. That's why, after the first failed attempt to misjudge someone's personality, I retreat into silence. But it happens to me at the publishing house too. Who would have thought that people who write about the same things we do—the incandescent doubt of life and death—would only skim, and not even read half of, the poem we've given them? They return it, they do, or they take it home and tear it up where I can't see them. It's not envy, though it closely resembles it, but rather the discomfort of constantly talking about the same thing, which is like seeing ourselves in an audible mirror. A kind of recording we listen to from a cassette on a small recorder on the bedroom nightstand. Our abstract thoughts made concrete: the mirror of our inner voice reflecting back the fear we try to rid ourselves of in our writing.
How do we explain to someone on the street who asks us something we don't quite understand?
It's not even about getting rid of that inner restlessness, but about grasping the unknowable within methodical parameters. Precisely like the plan of a novel.

After settling down at one of the tables outside the café on the sidewalk—it's already packed inside—and adjusting the buttons of my raincoat and pulling my scarf up to cover my chin and nose, we try to speak and be heard. The other person happily agrees and orders coffee and other treats. "And you?" I ask. I'll have a cortado, or maybe a tear, like the one that's trickling from my eye and will slowly freeze before drying on the scarf. I think about how much

cash I have left in my pocket, in case the other person suddenly forgets to pay or is simply waiting for me to treat them. I do some mental calculations, and just in case I don't have enough, I order nothing more than a glass of water.
“Are you on a diet?” she asks with a smile.
“No, I’m a little sick,” I would reply, if this weren’t an opportunity for further discussions I don’t want to get into. I love talking about literature, but I only write about illnesses, alone and in silence.
I know the cold isn't good for my ailing feet, covered as they are by two pairs of socks and low-heeled shoes, because at the office they force women to wear the traditional feminine attire of skirts and shoes. And what will I do when they take me to the hospital and have to amputate? Goodbye skirts and low heels, and goodbye to my job, probably.
But it hasn't happened yet. I'm missing several toes, yet my feminine shoes conceal my shortcomings. And when I start to speak, the others listen without looking at me. I sense in them a certain admiration and a growing envy that dispels resentment and fills the air around us with an aura of places and ideas that take shape in the cold wind. They are like words written in the air with instructions for building worlds that want to enter us, even against our will, and materialize around us, changing the landscape. Time, then, is different, because another space is another time. On this same sidewalk, where food carts run, cars and buses skim along the curbs, and lights flicker on as winter prematurely darkens the afternoon, there were, long ago, other things less technically complex: horse-drawn carts, fruit and vegetable stands with wooden crates, kerosene lamps, and cobblestones on the street and sidewalks. And lots of dirt and dust.
So I begin to explain that I still write, from time to time, so as not to reveal that I'm also still a weirdo who writes all the time, even when I'm not sitting in front of a typewriter. I write when I dream and when I work, when I'm on the bus and when I get off through the back door, and when I shove my way onto the western train the times I go to visit my cousin Leticia in Morón. I have a long, boring novel, and I look at the condescending smile of the person I'm talking to. I have a novel that came from I don't know where, but I think I can guess.

Now I speak, but I don't know if aloud. If they hear me, I don't much care, and although I'd like to keep my innermost thoughts to myself, that would be like asking a writer for pears from an elm tree. Thoughts are the substance of what we do: the material that raises our buildings amidst desolation, be it sand or snow. And especially if it's on the water of the sea. What is built on the sea is lighter, perhaps, although I doubt it, because I'm not even sure of the consistency of water: salt is capable of building an eternity.

The first chapter is a revision of a longer story written some years earlier. It is about a hunted man who must carry his ailing father almost on his back through a dense forest. The man suffers for himself and for his father, and knows he must save him. But as he walks and eludes his pursuers, he remembers the reasons for the pursuit: he carries them on his back. The old man is the cause of his downfall, and he has passed it on to his descendants.

I think of my father, who died in a hospital bed after they amputated his limbs one by one; he was blind, too. I was very young, but I remember the smell of decay on the sheets. I didn't have the money to buy the right medicine; it was very expensive then, as it is now. The Peronist government had vanished, and the military that followed intensified the use of weapons and violence, but not the supplies in pharmacies and hospitals. My mother sewed the sheets and took them to the hospital because they said they couldn't keep up with changing them every day. I don't know if they gave him antibiotics; I only saw the intermittent drip from the IV bag connected to his veins. His fever was almost constant, but that didn't stop him from smiling at me when I went to visit him and lifting his head to give me a kiss. I would climb onto a chair to reach the tall, metal bed, which stood like a mechanical monster in the middle of the room. The handles that raised and lowered the headboard creaked and jammed, and I remember that under the bed was the bedpan filled with urine that accumulated after several hours. My mother would visit him for two hours in the morning, then go to work, and later to her teacher training course. When she finished, my father was permanently home, with both legs amputated and missing a hand. He was blind, but at least now he had his medication. My mother would laugh about it, secretly, and then cry. I was twelve years old when he died. I changed his bed linens every day, bathed him, naked, not caring about seeing what might have shamed me before. He

was my father, after all; it was his body that I had embraced when he came home from the slaughterhouse smelling of blood.
Every memory is a premonition.
The afternoon she died, she was alone. Mom arrived home at five from the school where she taught. She found my father and me in the same bed: his lifeless body, almost nothing but a thin torso with some dark hair on his chest and back, and me beside him, looking into his eyes, which were still open because I hadn't dared to close them, not out of fear, but because I knew he didn't want to stop seeing me even in death. I know that very well.
Later, when I learned I had the same illness as him, it was like recovering a lost scent. A cloistered scent I didn't want to let go of because it was the most absolute identification I could find in my life. Since then, everything I've written—literature being the substance that shapes me—has been about him. Not him as a person in particular, but what emanates from him: feelings, consequences, paths, failures, joys, compensations. The ingredients of fiction are like the cement dust that binds the bricks of a wall or the metal dust that falls from the welded beams of a building.
My father, Tejada, is what I write about, and from that the novel arose. He is the cause I carry on my shoulders, and what condemns me, too. I don't tell the ending of that chapter to the person sitting across from me today, listening attentively, trying to understand amidst the noise of the growing traffic on Avenida de Mayo, when the banks have already closed and the exodus of cars to the provinces or the suburban neighborhoods of the capital has begun. Because the ending is a blatant contradiction of logic, which nevertheless proves once again the human condition: acts of resentment can also become redemption.

My mother remarried two years later. My stepfather was also my father, and I have his surname. He was a literature professor and met my mother at the teachers' college. He was a professor there, and she was the oldest student in the class. My mother, surrounded by girls and a few men around twenty years old, stood out for her age, but above all for her intelligence. She would arrive at the school tired, and sometimes, with her eyes closed, she would continue writing in her notebook. "Are you clairvoyant, ma'am?" Renato Taboada would

call to her from his desk. Startled, she would open her eyes. "Excuse me, professor, my eyes are tired." The others would make fun of her, of course, but he was the only one who knew she wasn't sleeping, because he had seen her writing. My mother told me that he had once challenged her to read those scribbles she had written with her eyes closed. She stood up, firm and confident, repeating the professor's dictation word for word. Trusting her auditory memory more, he gestured for her to approach with the notebook. She walked between the rows of desks and handed it to him. The professor read the clear handwriting, only occasionally slightly slanted on the graph paper. They were her exact words, but in the middle of each sentence, sometimes interrupted, were parentheses where she had added her impressions, almost always related to social issues and matters of justice or law, and many others tinged with quotations from poems. She looked at him without shyness, but with a submissiveness born of respect. The professor said to her, “May I keep it until tomorrow, Mrs. Gonçalvez?” That's what he called her, by her maiden name; she didn't know if it was by mistake, but she suspected something. “Is there something wrong, professor?” “I just want to exchange opinions with you about *Hopscotch* .” She returned to her seat amidst the veiled smiles of everyone else.
My father, Taboada, taught me to write, or rather to nurture and develop what he always called the predisposition that was already being born in me. I had two fathers, then. One gave me this body I now inhabit, and death within it; the other molded my soul and the life I lead. With one I constantly stumble and cannot rise above the level of the tiled sidewalks of Barracas; with the other I soar over the world and build cities, I create men and women who are born and die. One gave me humanity, the other the divine.
I am two in one person, or I am two halves. Always believing myself to be enough, yet always incomplete.
This is my war.

It was eight o'clock at night when I left the confectionery shop. Night had been falling for some time, but the traffic was still moving, though less forceful and chaotic, and the people walking by were very different from the office workers or bank employees. They were couples or groups of young

people going into bars or restaurants, elderly couples perhaps on their way to the theater. A dog, terrified and freezing, passed by, nodding its head and sniffing at the walls, until it curled up in a ball on the threshold of a locked gate, where no one was sweeping up the leaves or the trash anymore.

I had started reading after my companion left around six-thirty. He was patient with me, I must admit, listening to the fragments of my story. He left, writing his address on a napkin so I could send him my novel when it was published. We shook hands, more formally than when we first met. I was exhausted from talking; I had gotten so much anxiety off my chest: the anxiety caused by the uncertainty of my job, the worry about my health, and that kind of unease I seemed to be causing Bernardo's patience.

I walked along the sidewalk, colder than in the afternoon, but the darkness had lulled me to sleep. Of course, when one speaks of darkness in the heart of Buenos Aires, one refers to the darkness of mercury vapor lamps, the lights of shops, the headlights of cars. All those lights define the darkness by their very presence: they are a negation by affirmation. Why do I always think in dichotomies? Why, when I think of something, does its opposite always appear to confuse me? Over time, however, the contradiction became an established habit, until I wasn't at peace until I saw it appear. And there it was then, the new entity: the opposite of the contradiction, which wasn't empathetic or in agreement, but another contradiction that reinforced the domestic languor into which the other had transformed.

Exactly like when, after one wound has healed, another has already begun to appear. The sores kept me on edge, and so I had to read to lose myself in a world that existed in printed letters, but that nourished the café table on the sidewalk, the cup with the broken handle, the small glass of water, the crumpled napkins, and the dampness clinging to the walls that watched me, asking like messengers when I would go inside to warm my bones by the stove. I knew the cold was bad for me, yet there I was: numbing my body, but feeding my mind.

I walked, gazing at the shop windows, to the bus stop. While I waited, I watched the news on a television in a shop window. I followed the headlines and imagined the sensationalist rhetoric of the news anchors. The war in the Middle East: Israel against its age-old enemies, elbowing its way through a

territory it was trying to reclaim, like someone longing to return to the house where they were born, only to find a condominium instead. Where can one look for what can no longer be recognized? The Cold War, in its forty-fifth episode of its twentieth year, just to say so, to invent numbers and statistics that have always so delighted leaders. Because there is no way to justify a war except by basing it on the reductions that numbers make of men and their actions. Numbers justify everything, numbers can be erased, but they feel no pain. One way of the world against another way of the world, that's what they want us to believe. But where does one end and the other begin? A woman's uterus in California is exactly the same as a woman's in Siberia: both bear the remnants of abortions, both are scarred. The hand of a boy in Buenos Aires who cuts himself on broken glass while scavenging in the trash is the same as the hand of a man in Croatia who cuts his fingers in a factory; neither will ever be able to use that hand again, neither to love nor to kill. The boarding house in La Boca that has been demolished is like that building in Warsaw that collapsed under the fire of mortars. And an old colonial estate in San Isidro hides behind clumps of ivy and sealed doors something very similar to what lay beneath the rubble of a building on the outskirts of Moscow: bodies, documents, and instruments of torture.

The bus arrived, but there was already a long line of men and women who wanted to get home in time for dinner. I was pushed, of course; there wouldn't be another bus until ten o'clock at night. The old man complaining, who probably has nothing waiting for him but an old dog he's left alone all day, and which might already be dead. That's what he's been thinking about all day, probably. And the woman with the bags she uses as shields in a fratricidal war to get on the bus and get home to cook dinner for her husband, who will arrive after midnight after partying with friends and another woman, and already without an appetite. She knows it, but as always, she tries hard to deceive herself.

I stood halfway between the door for getting on and off, in the middle of the aisle, unable to grab any of the ceiling handles, but held up by the bodies of the others: bags of skin and bones that were like the plastic bags filled with vegetables and groceries, leather briefcases bulging with papers or the odd bottle of whiskey or beer. And also the smell of breath condensing in the

murky air of the bus with its closed windows, forming a paste that bound us together, and then the real war began. The one that had been declared to separate us, because a man is not made to live subjected to the whims of another: a man walks and needs to feel the air around him, a man tosses and turns in his bed feeling the chain of the sheets upon him, a man knows that between him and the earth there is nothing but invisible death, which he accepts as he accepts the inevitable after fruitless struggles against it; But he also knows that between him and heaven there is nothing but his own will and his own powerlessness: with one he dreams, with the other he resigns himself. Powerlessness makes us sit in a room of our houses, look out the window and wait, afternoon after afternoon, night after night, but exercising the will of one who chooses to be alone. Solitude is a fortress, an obstinacy, a war we wage against others. Let no one come to bother us, let no one approach to ring our doorbell, and if they do, let it ring and ring until it is exhausted and goes away. The doors locked, the blinds drawn, the curtains closed, and the sound of the gas from the stove hissing so languid and serene as if angels were dreaming.

By the time we were approaching the terminal, there were only five of us left. I was able to sit down and look out the window at the reflection inside the bus: that emptiness satisfied me, and suddenly I was afraid to get off. When I did, the overly dark and empty neighborhood around my house would seem more frightening than that metal bubble that protected me from the night. Getting off the bus was like stepping into another universe. I don't believe in literal interpretations; I think everything is as relative as the observer's perspective. But this time I might risk using that word, as ignominious as it is exalted in its pretentious meaning, or connotation.

I touched the curb with one foot and then the other, and as soon as I did, the bus was already moving and disappearing down the street. I watched it turn off its interior lights, disappearing into the night like a cowering rhinoceros. I stood on the sidewalk, and suddenly the cold seeped into my feet, barely covered, as I said, by my open-toed, low-heeled shoes. My socks barely offered any protection anymore, because the sweat from the whole day inside the office had been compounded by the dampness from the street. I scolded myself for my obsession with going to the bookstores on Corrientes and

Avenida de Mayo after work, because it would have been easier to just take the bus directly from Villa Urquiza to Barracas without going through downtown. But that's just me, I told myself, stubborn like my mother and with my father's body. I had several blocks to walk, because the bus had dropped me off on the avenue. It was almost ten. No, ten thirty, my wristwatch told me. I wasn't wearing gloves, and my fingers had gone numb again. The street was deserted, as usual midweek. Everyone was either having dinner or finishing up, watching television at full volume, oblivious to what was happening outside in the dead of winter. I passed the usual dogs: the short one that looked like a long-haired, short-snouted dachshund, impervious to the cold, rummaging through the garbage on the ground; another tall and skinny one like a greyhound that climbed onto the tall bins and tore open the bags, but today none of the neighbors cared about what was going on in this cold. I walked with my arms crossed and my head wrapped in my scarf. My feet were suffering, I know, but I could barely feel them anymore. Thank goodness, I told myself, that Bernardo was on duty today and wouldn't be able to scold me when he took off my socks and saw my feet as white as milk.

I crossed paths with a man I didn't know from the neighborhood. His eyes gleamed in his face, framed by a dark leather cap that reflected the dim light from a nearby streetlamp. I wasn't afraid because I fear other things, it seems, more than the violence of a man. If I'm not afraid of loneliness, how can I fear the violence of someone who is nothing more than an empty shell filled with resentment? Perhaps the pain, at first, but then resignation would align with that resentment, both reconciled by that undisturbed lady called understanding. Fine, let them rape me or wound me, and then let me go. My body is already damaged, and not even resentment, as strong and painful as it is, could dig any deeper into the cracks of my flesh.

I arrived home. I turned on the heaters and went to the bedroom. The walls were covered with books suffering from the dampness, the bed was unmade because Bernardo often overslept and barely woke up in time to get to the hospital. I took off my shoes and felt my feet relieved. I took off my socks and saw my left foot, a bluish color tending towards purple. Cyanosis, that's the exact term. They had already amputated my toes, and now it would be my foot's turn. I undressed, and wrapped myself in a blanket, went to the

bathroom and sat on the edge of the bathtub. I turned on the hot water and gradually cooled it down with cold water. I couldn't feel anything in my left foot, and I could even burn myself and not realize it.

My body was no longer mine, in a way. It was like looking at someone else's body, but without seeing their face. You could prick it, burn it, or cut it, and nothing would react: not a movement or a cry. That's what Bernardo does in the hospital: anesthetize the patients and act accordingly. That's human medicine, and is it the only one? I wonder. Pain can also be a remedy, but unfortunately, fear takes it by the hand like a possessive and controlling mother. It never lets go, and then pain looks at its mother with anguish, and she tells it to scream and escape. The all-powerful fear that turns angels into weak, cheap demons, hidden in the caverns of hell, where there is no fire as they say, but nothingness: where they can fear nothing. Emptiness doesn't produce fear, but desolation, and the accompanying anguish is a bed where sorrow slumbers into a slow and insensible death. The anguish, being so vital, takes on the rhythm of the heart, which we no longer feel because it is so monotonous and monotonous.

I dipped my feet in the water. I injected myself with insulin, the only dose I could manage all day. Bernardo didn't even know that; he'd already given up trying. He watched me sleep during the nights he was home, I noticed, leaning on the pillow with his head resting on his hand. When it was past midnight, he resigned himself to not being able to understand me, and with a caress on my shoulder, he finally laid his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes. Then I would open mine and see his utter helplessness: the helplessness of a man who wept inwardly, the helplessness of a body I loved and whose warmth protected me from the cold winter that I nevertheless liked more than summer. Bernardo was winter, and it had arrived in the middle of autumn. Bernardo healed me, and sometimes he tried to comfort me, because he didn't know how. Occasionally he observed me as if he were examining an anatomical specimen in which he couldn't find the soul. I knew he was talking about us with a friend, I think it was Ibáñez, and another one who had come once, a certain Márquez. I was glad that he was talking and elaborating with them, because he wasn't the kind of man to talk to himself.

Tonight I thought about killing myself. Actually, I didn't see it that way, because I knew that if I amputated myself, I would bleed to death without feeling any pain, and it would be like falling asleep. And suddenly, when I had already gone to the kitchen to grab the knife from the drawer under the counter, I realized that I needed the pain. So I thought about cutting my wrists; that way I would kill myself with pain. Anyway, I had created the perfect situation for a great theatrical scene.

I saw myself in the middle of the austere scene: a kitchen and bathroom in an old house, damp walls, antique furniture, worn tile floors, all dimly lit by the low-wattage lamp hanging from the ceiling. The silence of the street, broken only by the shout of a drunk who had fallen and crushed a dog, or the distant wail of an ambulance siren that would never reach my house. And there I was, bleeding out, waiting for the applause that would never come.

Then I heard barking that seemed to be coming from the avenue. It must have been past midnight. The last kiosk selling cigarettes and beer had closed; the garbage truck wouldn't come until dawn. There was no reason for so much barking, continuous and from so many dogs. I drew back a curtain, wiped the fog from the window, and saw nothing but stillness and silence. The dogs were barking, but I didn't see any of them. I waited a long time, enduring the cold in the parts of my body that were still alive. I felt like I was in a trench, watching the enemy's movements. The barking bombs were distant, and I trembled, my wounds gnawed at by the teeth of winter, without bandages to cover them.

That was my daily war: the fight with my body that I carry like someone carrying the body of a dead comrade on the battlefield, taking it to the nearest hospital that is always further and further away.

And at night that war is like tonight's. Alone, stubbornly clinging to my own obstinacy, I fight with my soul.

There are wars no one wins, for example, the one we wage with ourselves. It begins the moment we are born. Let's set aside intrauterine life, so controversial in its definitions and certainties, and dedicate these reflections to the conventional. We emerge into the world crying. Does something hurt us? We can't remember, but surely it does. The change in environmental

conditions: who can even imagine that period with sensations even remotely resembling reality? It is the period many have defined as ideal, but we suffer, surely, as any organ of our mother suffers, because we depend on her. But the genes that will define our psyche are not in those other organs: consciousness, still a rudimentary form, is developing. And it will continue to do so in the first years of postnatal life, growing through the accumulation and association of experiences. And it is then that the war becomes clearer, because it has always existed. No one has declared it, although we could well blame our parents when they conceived us. That night, perhaps one afternoon, or very early in the morning, their bodies mingled in what they called love, or something similar that they deemed sufficient. I remember Leandro and I talking once about D.H. Lawrence and his *Lady Chatterley* , and he told me that sex is like war. There was frustration in his voice, clearly, and I watched him from my seat in the Morón municipal library. We had gone there to study with Leticia, and he was in love with her, but my cousin wasn't paying him any attention. He was sad and confused, wandering around the park of the estate near the train tracks, so I said to him, "Let's go to the library; you ca n't study here." We left her in her usual reverie and went. It was then, on the other side of the desk where we were sitting, studying, that he said that to me. "Did you sleep with Leticia?" I asked him. He laughed, covering his face with his book. The other readers glanced away for a moment and returned to their studies. When he uncovered his face, he was crying. I held out my hand, and he squeezed it tightly. He nodded, and I understood that it had all been a failure. It was that afternoon that what I can call Leandro's love for me began, that sort of detour that gradually became the main avenue of his life. The other path he had tried to forge toward my cousin had been rendered obsolete, like a dirt track no one ever traveled, overgrown with weeds and finally vanished.

That was one of my battles: the one between who I was and what I said. It's very difficult to define the boundaries of the combatants, and in reality, it's never just about two, and they aren't even the main ones. Many we know participate, and many others we sense, still unknown, until we find them around a corner in the city-battlefield.

What we are or what we want to be, and this is the greatest conflagration of unknowns who appear already tired of their own internal wars, like countries that join a world war immediately after or still without finishing their civil wars.
What we desire, or believe we desire, which is so different, are in themselves a set of battles that never end, similar to those soldiers who, running towards the front amidst grenade explosions and with bayonets in their arms, shoot their comrades because of grudges and hatreds born in the trenches.
What we say contradicts us, and in this there are no middle grounds, no limits other than our own stupidity, which is revealed every time we open our mouths. We don't even need to speak; the slightest movement of our lips defines a concept that can no longer be erased. And the next instant, another concept, attempting to say the opposite, only serves to accentuate what was said previously. We call them excuses, others call them apologies, others call them notifications of forgiveness, and many more will sow resentment with their silence, nurturing the tree of war.
What we do, our behavior that strives to move through the streets as if we owned the world. We know that someone else is the true owner, that vagabond who walks with three dogs at his side and flies buzzing around his threadbare clothes, his face shadowed by a beard and a thick wool scarf around his head, wearing boots with worn soles tied with laces, old corduroy trousers, and an overcoat that was once camel hair but now shines faded from the raindrops. All of that belonged to several men, or perhaps to just one, bought in the good old days of Harrods on Florida Street, with some lady in a Chanel-style suit, alternating shopping with an English-style afternoon tea. We all know who that vagabond is, the one who, as described, carries two bags that are never the same, heavy judging by his effort, filled with something that was once alive, and of which only a startling smell remains, attracting dogs from time to time. But animals are as old as the world, and they know how to wait. And the man, even older, walks like a scrawny, tired adolescent, somewhat hunched over from the weight of the bags, both frightened and proud. The boasting suits him, but even more perfectly suits his body is that indifference that many would mistake for stupidity. In reality,

it is a mixture of naiveté and wisdom. Who says that the two are not compatible, or even complementary?

I've seen it appear precisely after something I've done, and then I realized how the grain of sand that constituted my act became a dune, a storm in a desert I would never finish crossing. That's what each of our acts is: the endless sum of errors that, like zeros, are added to the right of any number. Parsimonious addition instead of abrupt multiplication, because parsimonious pain is more effectively tolerated so that the wanderer can come looking for us with his eternal and pitiful patience.

I stop on the sidewalk and turn around to watch him walk away. From behind, he looks the same as from the front; he walks away and yet he looks back at us. Dogs lack that characteristic; they are, plausibly, more human, because they only turn their heads a couple of times to look at me, and then continue on their way, loyal to the vagabond, master of the world.

Wars like the one that happen on the sidewalks are the same ones that occupy our sleepless nights: remorse gnaws at our insides and consumes them, the doubt that creates the empty abyss where all the possibilities of things are consumed.

And happiness is brief, so brief that it seems illusory, and perhaps it is.

War is won by deceiving the enemy; there are no honest wars. Sincerity is the element of peace because it implies not tolerance, nor even forgiveness—those flimsy remnants of a fictitious structure on a theatrical stage—but the absolute absence of resentment or rancor, where guilt has died like a child aborted from an ectopic pregnancy. That is what guilt is: a pregnancy that strives to occupy the main space: it grows and moves, shifts and destroys, and like cancer, but full of life, it rises and stands like a conqueror on the hill of the dead. It has a flag that each and every one of us waves for the rest of our days.

And when our bodies are nothing but refuse waiting on the sidewalk of the world for the vagabond to arrive, that flag covers us to protect us from the cold and the frost. When we no longer need it, there it is, ready to protect what it has nurtured for many years.

Wars against ourselves are the only irreversible ones, the only truly bloody ones.

The winner is also the loser, and the cycle is perpetuated by its own failure. It's like a snake biting its own tail.

Tonight I've thought about all this, and the dark sky at three in the morning is a cave of silence. The dogs have fallen silent. I'm in bed, shivering with cold, and I wait.

KAFKA IN BARRACAS AL SUR

I have rarely felt good doing journalism, or should I say writing journalism, because this is only one branch of an activity too transcendent to be

considered a pastime, and too trivial to be considered a branch of the arts. What is journalism? Investigation, information, analysis? In my limited, particular, and stubborn experience, it is all of these combined. What is investigated must be analyzed in order to then be reported as accurately as possible. But then, those who work conscientiously, the naive ones who, due to a congenital, chronic, and irreversible condition, still retain the seed of God speaking to them like a possessive mother in the depths of each of their actions, pointing the finger at guilt and punishment, always fall into the trap of reality. Reality is not a net but an infinite series of nets interwoven and woven upon themselves. When one knot comes undone, many others form somewhere else we cannot even imagine.

Literature and journalism are related only by occasional means of expression. Literature is always an attempt at reality, and its greatest achievement is the creation of a new reality gestated within the threads of existing networks. Like a dream filtering into waking life, or when the ingredients of reality construct a dream. Journalism, on the other hand, tries to follow chronologies, arguments, and the logic it intuits must underlie this entire framework—immeasurable, yes, but also too beautiful in its complexity to be without a purpose. It searches, explores, draws deductions, but its tools are precarious and cannot discern beyond the horizons of an innocent. Innocence does not imply imbecility, much less ignorance. Innocence can sense sordidness and even contemplate it face to face, but it will not understand it.

And that's what journalism aims for: to understand in order to inform. Like literature, it's another interpretation of the enigmatic reality. And unlike literature, for which lies are the ultimate expression of imagination, journalism considers them a failure.

That's why every month and every year of my work at the publishing house has become a series of fiascos I've had to take responsibility for, because anyone who writes must know that there's no way to erase a thought. Often, I've sat questioningly before the typewriter, one finger still on the keys and the other rubbing my eyes as if that could massage my brain like a sore muscle, searching for the dark recesses where I've abandoned a certain phrase or idea. Have I ever said it, or written it, or even just thought it? And if it bothers me, why couldn't it bother someone else too? How can we know

that no one has read, heard, or seen us? Conscience sows doubt; reason, as Goya said, creates monsters.

Beltrame, who was the editor at the time, after a few articles he considered well-written, assigned me to write pieces for "El Radar de Buenos Aires." I had to go out into the streets, which were then agitated by numerous social demonstrations: striking unions blocking the intersection of Rivadavia and Callao. We journalists took refuge in the El Molino café, which closed its doors, but the waiters, used to the gunfire and ignoring the tear gas, served us coffee and croissants. Sometimes, the men would order a whiskey as the hours passed and the gunfire, shouting, and sirens continued well into the night. Most of us took advantage of the time to sit down and write the day's article, which would appear in the first edition the following morning. Once, I think it was August 1st, when it was already ten o'clock at night and I was very tired of sitting in the hard, old chairs, my ideas, which I had already finished writing down, exhausted, I joined my colleagues in their request to climb to the tower near the mill where there's a window. The owner, leaning on the counter, condescendingly agreed. At that time, the newspaper paid for all our expenses and all our mischievous whims. We climbed the narrow stairs and reached the window that gave us a grand panorama of the Buenos Aires night. The Congress building still had its windows illuminated, the exterior statues heavy and unscathed by the violence, faithful to the eternity to which they had been entrusted. The plaza was still full of demonstrators, now mostly still, sitting or lying down. From time to time, shots could be heard from Rivadavia Street, chasing some group of protesters. There were bonfires in the middle of Callao Street, which had been closed to traffic since very early in the morning. And everywhere there were military vehicles, police cars, fire trucks, a few ambulances, and tanks. The tanks' cannons were pointed toward the plaza, where the men and women, seemingly motionless, waited around the monument to the two Congresses. I elbowed my way through Contreras and González, who, like good gentlemen, always felt compelled to protect me since I was the only woman in the group. I poked my head through the opening as Contreras lifted me slightly by the waist to get a better look. I felt his warm hands, neither violent nor indifferent, timid like his voice, hidden behind the camera that concealed his true nature. He was Chilean and had

photographed several revolutions and coups; I had even held an exhibition of his work a few years earlier. He was well-regarded at the newspaper, and I think I was lucky they assigned him to accompany me.

I gazed at the crowd in the plaza like a still swarm of dead ants. And it took the helicopters that then flew overhead with their lights to make me realize that this was indeed the case: a large part of the crowd was wounded, and surely many were dead. The lights flickered across the faces, some lifeless, others suffering, etched on the asphalt and tiles like the background of a vast concrete canvas. Contreras suddenly let go of me and began taking photographs; the others peered in, some with cameras, others taking notes. There were four men and one woman, and I was the only one who remained looking at what the others didn't seem to notice, because they were contemplating the desolate panorama of the civil war solely through the general connotations it had for politics and society. Their faces were overwhelmed and ecstatic because we were the only media outlet with access to this spectacle. I should have clarified earlier that the owner of the confectionery shop only allowed journalists from Radar to take refuge inside: we already knew that Beltrame had an arrangement with him. He had been threatened, the old man, son and grandson of the founders, said, and he needed protection. At that time, Beltrame bestowed blessings like a bishop: it was the torment of his fear and the echo of his ignominy, which would undoubtedly not end well, I could well foresee.

And among the groups rising before the blinding glare of the helicopters, I saw a woman with tangled hair, I think brown, but gleaming in the flashes of the lights. She wasn't crying, and her gaze was clear, firm, and furious. I think I recognized her. She was one of the leaders of the left-wing resistance. Ideologies were so intertwined in those days that everyone confused subversives with leftists, leftists with democratic socialists or Soviet communists, and the military lumped them all together in a hodgepodge of charismatic figures, reformers, saviors, and state terrorists. But the bodies were there, lying in the square, and among them was a woman who had been a teacher and had barely practiced her profession before becoming involved in social politics. Her name was Gloria, I think, and I saw her walking with a piece of cloth under her arm toward the fountain. She stood as high as she

could reach, not at the statue of the Republic, but still, she unfurled the crumpled cloth and shook it as best she could. It was obviously the flag, and her photo appeared on the front page of the newspaper the next morning: her holding hands with some old statue, a symbol of old ideas, and in the other, wearily waving the flag. You could even see the beginnings of tears, which Contreras managed to capture as rarely before, he said. The merits of a photograph, he remarked, lie not so much in the photographer, but in the timing.

Of course, the newspaper sold well and was a success, generating arguments and complaints, congratulations and insults. That morning, several high-ranking military officers entered Beltrame's office and angrily confronted him. When they left, he sat staring at the front-page photograph on his desk, elbows on the table, nervously rubbing his forehead and beard, and running a finger over the newspaper, no doubt smudging it with the photograph's ink. It was said that he knew that woman, that she was or had been his lover. I couldn't believe it at first, but that was the first time I understood.

Contreras came in. They argued. Contreras was tall, lanky, and thin except for his abdomen, which bulged like a pregnancy and had been the subject of so many cruel jokes in the office. He stormed out, slamming the door; the papers on the desks rattled in the breeze. He sat down and covered his face. González, his closest friend, placed a hand on his shoulder, tried to straighten the collar of his white shirt like a devoted and timid wife, and said to him:

-Don't worry , you have a name, you can get any better job.

Then it was my turn. I walked in angry, but when I saw Beltrame's face, I became what we women usually become when we see a man cry. We become his mothers, his shoulder to cry on, we take refuge in his temporarily wounded shadow to allow it to heal. And we let ourselves be intimidated, perhaps, because we love what we are not: the harsh shadow of wounded strength, hurt pride, defenselessness, and coldness. We love what we don't understand, because if we did, it wouldn't be the same. That's what's happening to him, I told myself. He misses her, he longs for her, he sees her in the photo as a new emblem of the revolution, and I know that photograph was so reminiscent of Rubens' famous painting that he couldn't help but see her as a new savior of the homeland, but one who would die trying. There

would be those who would knock her from her pedestal and tear down her flag, once she was dead. And yet the nation would continue to live, as always, going in and out of psychiatric hospitals, convalescing and sometimes believing it was recovering, consuming medicine, alcohol, and news on the midday television newscasts. The nation broken and rebuilt like a skeleton in an anatomy lesson.

My God, I thought, how he misses her. He certainly loves her, even if he won't admit it. And meanwhile, he pretends not to care, because the others are up there. If he had any dignity, I thought for a moment, he should kill himself.

But what about God? That's what he must be wondering. He always wore a silver cross under his shirt; you could see it on his hairy chest in the summer when he unbuttoned the top buttons, or in the winter when the heating forced men to loosen their ties.

He looked at me standing on the other side of the desk.

-I don't need to tell you anything, do I?

I silently accepted the compliment. Having women's intelligence acknowledged is still disarming. Outwardly, I was pure fury.

- When do I go to the treasury?

"You're not leaving," he told me, sitting down and handing me a payslip. " Give this to Dora Cifuentes, the one from the supplement, you know her ."

So I didn't say goodbye, but I buried myself in the news in the Sunday supplement dedicated to women. I didn't have the strength to keep resisting; I needed the job, of course, and Beltrame's face never ceased to captivate me. He was a handsome man, truly: slightly long, curly hair over his ears and the nape of his neck, a short beard, and dark blue eyes that reminded me so much of the Mar del Plata coast on rainy days.

I went to say hello to Fabio Contreras; who knew when I would see him again. I found him sitting in the cramped room we used as a kitchen. He had a coffee cup in his hand, the same one he always used and had brought from Cuba, with the slogan “Kill Fidel” on it, which of course he had had printed here in Buenos Aires.

"So?" I asked, affectionately patting his shoulder.

She looked at me tenderly. She had cried. Yes, that day I would be the shoulder to cry on, it was obvious. The other girls, the secretaries, were only

good for showing their legs and being caressed; they didn't listen, they didn't think, and their solace was limited to stolen kisses in the bathroom and behind locked office doors. I offered intellectual comfort; I was an equal, and that made me great, without them even realizing it. That is the strength of women: equality in individuality.
He told me about a possible contract in Rio, which he had rejected years before to stay here, but we already knew that line as old and outdated. The truth was that there was a new generation of photographers working wonders with new techniques, he knew it well, and his methods would soon be outdated. I thought about his last photo, the one that looked like a Rubens painting: the freedom and death of a republic, captured in the middle of the night, without any prior preparation, using only the lights of helicopters and the shadows of statues. Rubens, perhaps, hadn't needed anything more, either, than the smoke of fire and the blood of battles, and his mind had captured all of that in an instant that became infinite, but the time required to capture it was surely much more arduous. For the fat and thin Contreras, however, it was a matter of a second: the click of the camera shutter forever painting a moment in history.
-He told me to protect myself, you know ?
- Who?
-Who else is it going to be, you idiot? Beltrame, you know …the military…the photo. Maybe they'll let it slide, but they know me…my travels…you know . Don't worry , they have more important things to worry about these days, like explaining yesterday's attack...
-Or to hide it...they have many hands that take care of many things, that's why I'm afraid.
- Do you want to come to my house for a few days, so you're not alone?
- And what will your friend, the doctor, say?
-He doesn't have to say anything, besides, he's a strange guy, like us…
We laughed for the first time all morning, as if the future were a plain sown with grass under the warm sun of a summer day.

Several days later I learned that Beltrame hadn't fired me because he was friends with Leandro Mallea, who was opening a small publishing house in

San Telmo. Leandro called me that same afternoon to congratulate me on the front-page story, and during our conversation, the truth came out.
- Did you ask him for it?
"I didn't ask him for anything, I know him and I don't meddle in politics, my thing is literature..."
"The ivory tower…" I said, and immediately regretted it.
-Whatever you want, but his problem is with skirts, you've probably already heard.
-Something like that.
- And how are you?
I knew he was referring to my diabetes.
-Surviving, little problems with my feet, which even my boyfriend won't fix….
-I know how…
"The only way doctors can do it." I regretted it again, as if attacking one and defending another were the eternal custom of women.
From that week on, I changed my habits, but Dora Cifuentes's newsroom was just as old-fashioned and bureaucratic. Dora managed a team of men who wrote what she wanted, and if they didn't, she would cross things out and write over them herself. She had a whole week to find material, choose it, and write it, and sometimes that excess of time, compared to the pace of the newspaper, which produced two editions a day, overwhelmed her with superfluous indecisiveness. She herself acknowledged this:
This magazine is full of crap, and you think it's harder to choose between two pieces of crap than between two brilliant ideas? When you get used to mediocrity, you settle into a kind of shitty oasis where you learn to tell one turd from another. Which one do I choose?
I couldn't help but burst out laughing and thanked her. She was forty years old and had two children; her husband worked in the newspaper's workshops, but he couldn't read or write, which is why she had managed to smuggle him in there, as she put it.
"My Pepe is a gem," she always said, and that's why she didn't mind working in the women's supplement's editorial office with all the nonsense that routine imposed. She kept her thoughts on the military coup to herself, and the time I

went into her office looking for some evidence, I found a book by Simone de Beauvoir covered in pencil marks and numerous annotations.
He sent me out into the streets in search of cheerful stories, the ones he called positive and trivial. One day he sent me to Avellaneda, where a dog had been saved from being stoned to death by some kids by an old policeman who was about to retire. His name was Don Ramiro, and he'd never risen above the rank of neighborhood watchman. He was already old, and thieves walked right past him without him noticing, or perhaps he didn't care. Even if there were ten young, strapping policemen, there were orders to do nothing. Crime was organized, as the neighbors said. Sometimes, at night, after the watchman had left, unmarked cars would arrive and take someone from a house, usually a boarding house, at the end of a long passage between two high walls, behind which there was almost always a vacant lot. But generally, there weren't any robberies; the independent thieves went somewhere else, where there wasn't so much surveillance. Because in these situations and times, old Officer Ramiro, with his gray hair and hunched back, was a one-man army. He was like an ombu tree: ancient and legendary, unyielding and inviolable. The boys (soldiers) ran and played (shot and killed) around him, while he shaded them all.
I found him on the corner where they told me he'd be. He was looking straight ahead, wearing his regulation cap and with his arms crossed.
"Good morning," I said.
"Good morning, miss," he replied.
-I'm from Radar, I've come to interview you about a dog you saved a few days ago.
The old man took off his cap and posed as if for a photograph. I took one with my handheld camera.
Then he told me what happened.
It was afternoon. The boys go to the plaza when they get out of school. They make a racket, but they behave. But that day, a dog we didn't know started fighting with a chihuahua belonging to the lady who lives across the street, you see her?

He pointed out an old house in whose garden sat an old spinster in a rocking chair with a dog that kept barking at everyone who passed by on the sidewalk, even when no one was passing by.
"I wouldn't be surprised if it exasperated the other dog," I said, taking the matter lightly. But the policeman gave me a disapproving look.
-Miss Larriere can no longer hear anything, and we must all help her.
I bit my lip; I could already see that I was going to ruin all this stupidity.
The young lady was strolling with her cane, leading her little dog on a leash. I greeted her as she crossed the street and entered the plaza. The children were playing on the swings, and one fell and hit his head. When I arrived, the mother was distraught over the boy, but he was fine now, except for the bump and a little blood. But while this was happening, the strange dog, which I hadn't paid any attention to before, started barking at Jacinto, the chihuahua. Miss Larriere was even more distraught than the boy's mother, you can imagine. Deaf people are easily frightened because they lose their sense of proportion, especially when she's an elderly woman. I feared things would get worse, and they did. She wasn't used to lifting Jacinto, she couldn't easily bend down if she had to put down her cane, and anyway, the other dog pounced on the chihuahua. The two dogs fought fiercely, and luckily the other dog wasn't much bigger, so the forces were even for a while.
Don Ramiro cleared his throat, taking a minute to resume his train of thought, because that's what it was. If I'd had a recorder, I told myself, I wouldn't have needed to do anything more than transcribe it.
The old woman—I mean, the young lady—was pulling on the leash, not realizing that all she was doing was hurting her own dog more. Then the boys started throwing stones at the strange dog, but of course, they were hitting Jacinto too. I couldn't leave the boy, who was still dazed from the blow. Suddenly, the fight stopped. The dog had been hit hard on the head with a rock and was lying on the tiles next to the geraniums. Jacinto was yelping and yelping, his fur matted with the other dog's saliva, and he had a few cuts on his head, but he got up and started pulling to cross the street and go back home. The young lady was stunned, feeling pulled and dragged by Jacinto, but she couldn't run, of course, and she didn't want to let go of him. If she crossed alone, a car might hit her. Then one of the mothers who had witnessed the

whole commotion grabbed the leash and restrained the little dog for a while. Miss Larriere was excited and tearful; the other woman comforted her as they crossed towards the mansion.
Then the old man looked at me, as if expecting applause that he didn't believe he deserved.
"And the dog?" I asked.
-There, you see him, safe and sound.
-But I mean the other one…
"He died, of course. Didn't I tell you he was hit on the head with a rock ? I wrapped him in one of those burlap sacks the caretaker keeps in his shed and called the pound. They said they'd do an autopsy in case he was rabid... Knowing the Larriere family , we have to be careful."
- And why?
She looked at me as if I were a curious little girl and not a professional journalist, and in truth, I wasn't.
-The Larriere family is important, you understand, and the young lady is General Gonzaga's sister-in-law.
Yes, I understood. I didn't stay at the town hall to verify if the autopsy was true. Whether the old man believed it was plausible or not depended entirely on his senility, which would shield him from reality in his upcoming retirement. And what would I get out of all this? Nothing had been as they'd told me over the phone at the newsroom, and I had no sentimental piece to write for next Sunday. But it didn't matter anymore; I'd use the same scenario, make the "bad dog" disappear, and highlight the chihuahua, saying it had been the victim of an attempted kidnapping by a heartless anonymous assailant who was eventually apprehended. I'd mention the Larriere family ; that would keep me in the system's good graces, at least for the time being. To condone is not to compromise, they say, and that's how I tamed my conscience.

It was almost six o'clock, and the sun had set low enough that winter afternoon to let the cold do its thing on the streets. I ducked into a bar after walking more than fifteen blocks toward the Riachuelo, but all the way there I was deafened by the piercingly unbearable barking of the lapdog, hysterical

and more capricious than a spoiled child. Several times I looked back, because they seemed so real despite the distance that for a moment I almost convinced myself that the old woman and the dog were following me. Of course, I dismissed that fantasy, which the cold seemed to solidify on the sidewalks overgrown with weeds between the tiles and cobblestones. I was no longer in a residential neighborhood, but in a shantytown, what was once called Barracas al Sur. The smell of the Riachuelo was in the air, clinging to the old cobblestones, always more timeless than the putrid asphalt with which scrawny legions of underpaid workers tried to cover them up with that thin liquid that disappeared because it never fully coagulated and that vanished within a week with the passing of trucks. On the corner was a bar whose name I couldn't make out through the dirty windows. I heard deep barking and looked back. An old dog was barking toward the street I had come from. It was getting dark. I thought I saw the shadow of a thin, limping old woman, and I heard a man's voice as he stood up to look beside me. He said something, but I realized he was talking to someone else inside the bar. He said something like, "the sad old woman ." It was all too much like a tango to be true, and I chuckled to myself, remembering a poem by Homero Manzi. The tango cart arrived slowly and unsteadily, and contrasted with the unreal figure I thought I saw in the distance, at the end of the street.

I went into the bar and sat down at a table as far away from the window as possible. There, next to the wall, about two meters from the men's restroom, I put down my notebook and stuffed my unused recorder in my bag. Everything was so old and dirty in that place that I thought it was blasphemous to allow those tables, which had perhaps heard the voices of the first immigrants, to have any object, even remotely modernist, intrude upon their privacy. The most they had ever grown accustomed to was the use of a worn-out, capless ballpoint pen, which the waiter, messenger, or some bohemian writer would lend out from time to time, from the table to the counter, from the counter to a bicycle, and back again to the table of the old poet, too bad to be published. But perhaps the pen fell out of the pocket of the kid who carried orders to the boarding houses, or got lost in some dive bar that had resurfaced from the darkness of dusk like a cheap old ghost.

I could write a story with all those impressions, I told myself while I waited for the coffee with milk and the croissant, which finally arrived, the former almost cold and the latter hardened by the hours. Prepared to resign myself, there was no resignation because I didn't care. I consulted my notes.
There was one more possibility for Sunday's article. It wasn't a human interest story, obviously, but it was close to what usually attracted me. Around there, near the old barracks that were almost always closed because they hadn't been used for years, there had been an invasion of rats, or vermin, as they said. I don't remember who told me about it; I think it was one of the young photographers who wanted to curry favor with me so they could ask me out. Sometimes they made things up, other times they exaggerated, as on this occasion. I told myself that perhaps it would be appropriate to steer the interview toward the topic of urban hygiene, and hint at a bit of social commentary. I knew I could do it, and perhaps Dora would recognize that both approaches could be combined: the serious expressed with a touch of friendliness. Something like that is what the television news programs later exploited to the point of exhaustion and putrid sensationalism. But at the newspaper, under Beltrame's iron fist, we were still wearing the corset . And I remembered the cartoon that had circulated everywhere, clandestinely, of course, and which must have been hidden in the false bottom of some desk drawer in the newsroom, showing a general with a cap, multiple medals on his epaulettes , but dressed in a cocotte 's corset , his legs bare and hairy, and his boots on. The general was suffocating, but he kept lashing the air with his military whip. Who had drawn it? Everyone knew, but no one mentioned it. Two years later, the author would die of cancer, just as the general of the day was being laid to rest with his casket open in the vault of the military cemetery. Something the cartoonist's wife couldn't do, because the dead man's face was a caricature too severe, too sublime to be shown, made by the hands of cancer.
The bar gradually filled with men leaving work at the port or the shipyards. The younger ones ordered beer, the older ones grappa, and I thought to myself that I had stepped back in time. They paid me no attention, although at first they had glanced at me a couple of times. They played cards, laughed, and banged their fists on the table. A couple of boys were with their fathers,

and one or two dogs lay down under the empty tables. The interior lights came on, and outside the streetlamp on the corner fought like Don Quixote against a mercury vapor lamp that had slowly come on, cold and indifferent to anything outside its beam, as if it were the boundary between life and death. This was the complete opposite of what was happening inside the bar: the semi-darkness of the low-wattage lamps that alternated with the one that had burned out years before, the boisterous shadows of the men, their faces increasingly stained with alcohol.

I checked the time on my wristwatch. It was seven-thirty. It was dark, and I should have gotten up and left to catch the bus back home, on the other side of the Riachuelo. Bernardo must have already returned from his office since he wasn't on call that night. He was probably reading, losing track of time until fifteen minutes before nine, when he'd start cooking something, knowing I'd be late. But I didn't want to leave. I thought about going out and walking around. I called the waiter, who muttered an indecipherable number through his tobacco-worn lips. I left like a proper young lady from the old days, a schoolteacher in the style of Manuel Gálvez, or a piano teacher who, shivering with cold, had taken refuge in the bar, and the warmth of the workers had warmed her up. I went out, and many people wished me goodnight, some with a kind of mockery that disguised the respect I inspired in them. "The little schoolteacher of the workers," I told myself, paraphrasing Edmondo De Amicis, and in the end I felt comfortable in that role, the one my mother had fought for in vain with her speeches delivered behind closed doors, always for us, her family. The leftist discourse, not the populist kind, not the demagogic kind, but the socialist kind.

I went out into the street and was covered in invisible ice. Winter, however, pleases me. Winter is itself a form of self-absorption, a play on words that illustrates the various layers in which the mind develops. There are theories that explain the psyche as a series of independent apartments connected by sealed doors: things can be heard behind walls thin enough, but the doors don't open until the very end, when it's no longer necessary to see what lies behind them. Others represent the psyche as a series of concentric compartments, one on top of the other: they don't cancel each other out, they feed off the one below as if they were roots, floor upon floor, building

immense circular structures. That's what winter is, it seems to me, being in one of those apartments, looking out the window at the passing of what's outside: nothingness, perhaps, or death that passes and circles, that lurks and seems to slip away during the day as it condenses on the edge of the cold that brushes against our faces when we face the streets, urban gods that we have raised on stony pedestals to frighten us with words of consolation, where pity is a word as weak as the sound of the letters that form it: the weak vowels, the "d" like a buzzing messenger of illness, and the "p" that tries to stand out like a tired father at the end of a workday.

I've been thinking about all this, with the professional habit that transforms ideas into printed words on the invisible paper that is my mind. This saves me from the pain in my legs and the premonitions that overwhelm me: the illness I sense every morning after giving myself insulin injections, looking at Bernardo's face as if it were a mirror of my own. What he intends to show is the opposite of what I strive to express: the facets of the coin, yes, the coin that pays for the extra minute wears down and takes the impressions of the fingers that touch it. The last one, Acheron, will put it in his purse and it will never be touched again.

Suddenly, at nine o'clock at night, I found myself on the banks of the Riachuelo, still far from the bridge. The silence was strange, but it wasn't usual for me to be in a place like that at that hour. I could hear the traffic in the distance, but it couldn't drown out the sound of the slow current so close, and I felt the need to go toward it. I thought about suicide. Why? As so often happens, I revel in fantasies of tragedy. A frustrated actress, that's what I am, it seems to me, living in the skin of characters to rid myself of the yearning for victimhood with which I elevate the meaning of my life to levels tolerable with dignity, or at least with the idea I conceive of by that word. I sat down on what had once been a skiff and which now lay on the dock, weeds growing among the planks.

Then I heard footsteps from the street, kicking pebbles and sometimes stumbling on the tips of worn-out soles. I imagined a large, burly man with a black beard, curly hair, and a black overcoat with the collar turned up to his ears. I saw the white breath coming from his nose, and he must have seen mine, which is why he was heading in that direction.

I think I was afraid. Would he rob me? Would he rape me? I regretted my own stupidity more than the possible crime of a man who, perhaps, would do no more than what he had been doing all his life: respond without thinking, and thereby obtain the impeccable price of the moment, the instant that some call God.

I got up and walked again along the cobblestones, thinking I was escaping. I felt him several steps behind, unhurried. We walked two or three blocks like that, and I was already fed up. I started running; that way I'd settle the matter once and for all: if the man was just some nobody, he'd disappear into the distance, and if he wasn't, he'd catch up with me soon enough to finish what was probably written in the annals of that night. But it was another two blocks, and the quick footsteps repeated themselves behind me, neither ahead nor behind, constant, even monotonous, like the clatter of a typewriter. The cobblestones like keys where someone was typing on white paper, and under the label of my name written in black capital letters, the record of some Kafkaesque tribunal.

I heard the man breathing, and I even thought I heard the beating of his tired heart.

I saw a yard with its gates open and what I thought was a dim light. I went over and went in, closing the door behind me. Inside, there was nothing but darkness, but I heard a gurgling sound, perhaps the translation of those heartbeats, but now in the form of another substance: not blood but water, perhaps. Like a mill wheel? But it was a metallic sound, too. The subway fare entering the turnstile? The darkness and the deep sound in the background of the night suggested it.

-It's busy.

The voice surprised me; distorted, neutral.

"Excuse me," I said, staring into the darkness. The light I thought I'd seen earlier had vanished when the door closed. Had a lamp switched off with that movement, or was it the streetlight flickering in and out as if reflected in a mirror? A mirror in that place? I remembered that mirrors also reflect darkness.

-A man was following me, and I was scared.

Then I heard the person who had spoken to me get up and walk toward me. I recognized the sound of worn boots.

- What are you doing here, Ceci?

I couldn't see his face, but I recognized his voice, finally, and I think I would have burst into tears, out of sheer foolishness, out of pure exasperated sentimentality.

- Fabio? What are you doing here?

He lit a match, and I saw his gaunt face, his unkempt beard, and his cloudy eyes. He stepped back and lit a kerosene lamp. He sat down on a wooden bench and gestured for me to sit beside him. I did, took his hand, and asked him what had happened. I hadn't seen him since we said goodbye at the newsroom, but it hadn't been more than two weeks. It wasn't that long to see him so unwell. Since he didn't answer, I decided to give him time. I noticed that the place around us was set up for a long stay: a mattress covered with several blankets, a gas heater, a pot and a pan, set to one side on a shelf made from vegetable crates, Fabio's camera, and the four books he carried with him on all his trips, one of them Agustín Álvarez's **South America** and another Dickens's * *David Copperfield* *. That way, he said, he could understand what was happening to us Latin Americans.

He took one of my hands and placed it on his stomach. I feared an intimacy I didn't want, but I was wrong. My fingers felt the belly that had been the talk of the newsroom, but now it was larger, and yet Fabio's body seemed wasted away. I made a move to pull my hand away when I felt the movement under my skin. He held it tightly. I saw the pain on his face, and I think my hand was easing it, or at least the idea of another hand feeling the same was. It was a kind of comfort that God couldn't give.

-I'm going to die, Ceci. They're about to come out.

- What are you talking about? Stop talking nonsense and let's go home, Bernardo is going to check you out.

- Leave the poor guy alone, he already has enough to deal with from you.

I looked at him and didn't know whether to laugh or finally let out the tears I'd been holding back all this time. I did both at the same time, and when Fabio came over and kissed me on the cheek and wiped away some of the silly tears, I knew he was serious. Or he was crazy. Or I was crazy for believing

him. Because what he told me was unbelievable, as unbelievable as a trip to the moon or the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly.
They were cyclical, he explained. There are many like them, hundreds, thousands, perhaps. He told me about the Larriere family . I told him about the old woman with the little dog. He burst out laughing.
"They keep her locked away in the mansion because she's senile. Nobody believes a doddering old woman, and if she's from a noble family, they just go along with it and ignore her. She's like a stream that flows on and on without anyone paying attention anymore, and nobody sees that it carries away bodies and other things amidst all that filth."
He fell silent, and we heard the sirens of an ambulance. I once told Bernardo that one night in bed, as two or three ambulances sped past, I thought I heard the sirens wailing, and that I had truly grasped their allure in that reverie. I felt irresistibly drawn to them, to the point of feeling an overwhelming urge to get up, look out the window, and leave. That's what I thought now, with Fabio beside me.
"It's my turn now," he said. "We wait here until it happens; we're close to the water..."
- And that metallic noise, like train tracks?
It's the echo of the subway from the other side, coming from the tunnel they dug under the Riachuelo when the province and the nation planned to extend the subways to the greater Buenos Aires area, a project that was left in limbo. Sometimes I imagine it as a sky of deformed abortions crying and screaming in silence, all surrounded by a pink sky over a blue dream, while cherubs come and go changing diapers soiled with shit and blood.
We laughed. I asked him why him, that is, the reason he was just one of them.
"For the same reason you suffer what you suffer, Ceci. We don't choose our illnesses, although sometimes we think we've sought them out. But the world only chooses the ones it wants to acknowledge, because it suits its purposes for whatever reason—mostly economic, of course, pardon the platitude. Society suffers from the same psychological processes as any individual: it represses what it doesn't want to see or what hurts it, or simply doesn't understand. What does it do with death? It covers it with incense and rewards or punishments, or it ignores it without naming it, or it does so with

euphemisms like 'death' and 'passing away.' There are other, more technical and modern terms, but more uncertain ones, which say nothing at all, like 'cessation of vital functions.' We've heard all of this in every interview following a car crash or a shooting, from doctors, police officers, and government officials."
"Words hide," I said.
Words are ghosts, Cecilia. But we cannot live without them.

We stayed up talking until the early hours of the morning. He told me that the barracks had always served to conceal what he called the phase of the cycle.
- Is that why we're seeing news reports about rats and all kinds of bugs?
-There have always been some in these areas, of course, it's not for nothing that we live near the Riachuelo, and from time to time something appears to fill gaps in the news.
I thought about the carts that carried garbage to the river and others that returned to the city with merchandise unloaded from the ships. The wagons still pulled by old bay horses whose reins were held by the calloused hands of men, now also old, like ghosts from another century. But they were still men of flesh and blood who stopped to urinate more and more often and who, at the end of the day, went into the bar to drink grappa, a gin, and doze off in their chairs, one arm on the table and the glass at the end of their hand, their head tilted to one shoulder, snoring until the waiter shook them out. And all the while, inside their bodies, those beings stirred restlessly from the alcohol. But the alcohol did the man good, because it lulled him to sleep and made him forget.
- When is it going to happen?
"Anytime," he replied.
We lay down on the mattress. He hugged me, and I rested my head on his chest. I placed a hand on his stomach because I knew it felt good, and I wasn't afraid of what was stirring inside, which was almost a revolution, or a war. I heard the sounds of battlefields with trusses clashing and churning Fabio's blood like waves on stormy seas. I kissed his beard and then his lips. I seemed to see the man who ran through the streets of cities in the midst of civil war under dictatorships or through the fields of rebels in Colombia or

Cuba. I admired him, it's true, and I envied him, in a way. And both feelings mingled so much that it was a kind of love. I didn't think about Bernardo and his irascible patience, that contradiction that attracted me so much.

Fabio responded to my kiss.

He undressed despite the cold, as if preparing to be laid to rest. I saw his bare belly, its skin thin and covered in curly hair, and I let him climb on top of me and pull down my underwear. I felt them moving as Fabio slid inside me, like an army moving across my skin, conquering lands and establishing the civilization of a new government.

When he finished, he looked at me, scratching my face with his beard. There was sadness in his voice, and I know what he would have said if I had let him, but I covered his mouth with my hand.

A short while later, the pain began. He writhed, biting his lip to stifle a scream. I paced back and forth in the barracks, desperate. Should I go find a doctor? I couldn't let him die like that. I couldn't believe in all those fantasies. I was going to find a phone and call the hospital, but when I opened the door, I saw that dawn was already breaking, and I heard a short, hoarse cry from Fabio's strained throat. And with the light that streamed in, mercifully banishing the fears of the night, I saw the insects swarming the barracks like a sea overflowing its banks. They were coming toward the door, but the light stopped them, like a tide suddenly halting on the beach. Then, in the distance, I heard the rumble of the early morning subway echoing through the tunnel, carrying men and women to their jobs in the city. The insects scurried through the corners and disappeared through the holes that led to all points of the city, surrounding us behind the thin layers of cement we built to protect ourselves.

Fabio's body was an empty bag, similar to that burlap sack where the plaza watchman had put the dead dog.

I walked back through the early morning streets toward the bus stop. There was no one there yet. I waited until six in the morning, when I saw it coming from a distance. Then I felt a dog sniffing my leg. I looked at it; it regarded me with pity. It was white, and I realized that it wasn't really looking at me because it was blind. It simply sniffed my shoes and seemed to stay on the

sidewalk. Then it came back and grabbed something that was running along the curb. It chewed on it, and whatever it was crunched like an insect's shell. Before getting on the bus, I cleaned the soles of my shoes on the tiles, just in case there were any left; it wasn't a matter of invading the bus with the creatures of the night.

THE WAYS

1

I received two calls that day. I was still living in my parents' house in Mataderos, but a few blocks away from where my father had lived. A year after my mother married Renato, we moved fifteen blocks away, far from the smell of meat and its brutal wisdom. They were both teachers, and their faith in knowledge came from books, the wisdom of written logic, which had the advantage of multiplicity, reason and imagination combined to create theories that were like living beings. And all those bookshelves sang odes to the worlds they created, so different from the gloom of my now-deceased father, whose memory was an open wound like his injured hand, showing torn tendons and muscles, broken bones, and the old threads with which the surgeons had tried to repair the irreparable.

The memory of meat was unavoidable, of course, and its scent permeated the thoughts of each of us, except for Renato. That's why Mama was seduced by the sometimes stale aroma of the shaving cologne of the teacher she married, or the musty smell of the suits where she found mothballs strayed from the previous winter. But those smells were remnants of bygone days when the mind ruled over the flesh: there were no knives or axes, and the rough voices of men slowly transformed into a harmonious song of sounds and words.
The voice of reason was embodied in Renato's voice when he read stories or essays on Saturday nights, when the electricity would usually go out for many hours, and the only light came from kerosene lamps that shone in the windows, defying the winter that was already settling in on the sidewalks. The wind was his voice, howling, personifying the scenes Renato read, while Mom and I listened, immersed in a world we liked more than the distant but insistent memory of the Tejadas.
But the smell persisted, swirling around the room, even though we pretended not to notice it.
And it was that smell I noticed after picking up the phone shortly after noon. On Mondays, I usually stay home proofreading articles and editorials, and I submit them late that same day. It was the newsroom; I recognized Braulio's high-pitched voice, and I was surprised they were calling me at that hour.
- Ceci? You have to go cover an accident.
- Are you joking? Don't Scarfionne and Marizza take care of that?
The Italians have been here since this morning, but there are a lot of people to interview. The boss sent him, that's all there is to it. Hurry up , Beltrame is already there.
Beltrame himself covering the news?
- But what happened?
"A disaster," Braulio said. "A train ran over a school bus."
That was the worst thing that could happen to me on a Monday: seeing blood and mutilated bodies, and on top of that, writing about it.
I put on an overcoat and scarf; it was August. I rummaged through my purse looking for handkerchiefs, which I knew I'd need in the icy wind that afternoon, along with my notebooks and two or three pens. I told Mom I had work all afternoon and probably wouldn't be back until evening.

"Is it because of the accident in Quilmes?" he asked. He knew I was in the kitchen, listening to the radio or watching TV. He didn't want to know anything until he got there. I answered yes and left, closing the door behind me before he could ask me anything else.

It took me an hour to get there. There were ambulances, perhaps the last to leave the accident site, which I passed as I walked along the block leading to the level crossing. The police asked me for ID, but there were already too many television reporters broadcasting live, others from the radio, and many from the press. I knew a few who ignored me. They were all going back and forth along the tracks, taking pictures of the train stopped almost 100 meters from the crossing. The barriers were broken. And I think there were hundreds of pieces of metal scattered around the train and all over the tracks and surrounding area. That's what the bus was left in, of course, pieces of varying sizes. I asked questions of the onlookers who had ignored the markings the police and firefighters had put up to keep the area clear for the rescue work. They told me that only the front part of the bus remained somewhat intact. The firefighters had rescued several children alive but badly injured, and that some had gotten out before the crash. But there were almost 30 inside. Some neighbors were crying, still talking. I listened and took notes. The drizzle finally dampened the paper, and I put it back in my purse. The women were saying:

"I saw everything, miss. I saw when the bus stopped in the middle of the tracks. The driver was nervous because the engine wouldn't start. Several men got on to help the children out, but they were all hysterical and only managed to get six or seven out before the train arrived. That's when I covered my eyes and turned away. I couldn't watch that, my God..."

The woman was crying and two others were hugging her.

-They say a doctor rescued one who was hiding under the dashboard of the bus.

Perhaps I'd have the chance to interview him, but it was more likely someone would have beaten me to it. I thanked the ladies and started walking along the tracks. I saw the locomotive as a wounded old mastodon, but I had to watch my step. I was wearing low-heeled shoes, and I cursed my stupidity for not bringing boots. There was mud full of dirt, papers, cardboard, and mostly

metal and glass. I saw the only piece of the bus that had remained relatively intact, where the driver and the rescued boy were. I jumped when someone called my name. It was Beltrame, wearing a raincoat and a hat. His tie was loose, and he looked worried.

-Thank you, Ceci, we needed a woman to give the news a bit of feeling.

-Don't make me laugh, Bautista, what you needed was sensationalism.

"That's what men are for, Ceci. The ones who vomit stayed in the newsroom, like that faggot BBraulio ; the ones who feel nothing are here, and they're going to write corny drivel. I needed you, darling, because you know how to write."

He tried to win me over with flattery amidst that sea of rubble, metal, and bones. Because it was only then that I realized the smell of burnt flesh was everywhere, but above all, the aroma of flesh beginning to rot. How many hours had passed? Enough for the typical Buenos Aires winter weather to begin taking its toll on the remains.

I left Beltrame and kept walking. People told me things I hadn't asked about: what school they went to, where they lived, who their parents were, how they behaved, what they looked like, and what they liked to do. The women knew almost everyone, and then reality hit me again: some of them were the mothers, I suppose, of the wounded or the dead.

I came across a firefighter talking to a nurse or doctor, I'm not sure. I asked him for the figures. It seemed important to me to have some parameters to work with: the scale of the tragedy was proportional to the number of victims.

"We don't have official figures, miss, but not counting those rescued before the accident, we pulled five very badly injured boys out, and the others," he said, looking at the other, "what do you want me to tell you? We can't count them precisely, there are different groups, you understand."

I understood, and for a moment I think I would have burst into tears. I didn't because I didn't want to; I took a deep breath to compose myself, and the cure was worse than the disease. The smells I mentioned earlier filled my lungs, intensified by the memory: the blood on the sidewalks around the slaughterhouse, the pus in my father's wound, and my mother's whimpering at night after calming my father's inevitable wailing, which he couldn't stop no matter how hard he tried. In the end, he was just a man, just like these

boys who had now become bait for the vultures. Because that's what we were, the journalists, and also the curious onlookers who hovered like flies, waiting. There was a man, not very tall, thin, with dark, curly hair and a sparse beard, standing by the tracks, his hands behind his back, half-bent over, looking down. I stood watching him for a while because I was curious about his self-absorbed way of staring at the ground. And when I approached, I realized what had caught his attention. At first, I didn't notice my brusque, even insolent, manner, but when it was too late to repair the damage I had done, more than to him, to myself. I was angry only with my own role in that disaster-movie scenario, full of all the usual tired and hackneyed elements , but where blood was blood and iron was iron. And the bone that man was observing—or contemplating, I told myself to vent my anger and resentment—was a foot severed at the ankle, still wearing a sock and a school shoe.
"Are you having fun?" I asked as I approached.
He was startled, so engrossed was he, so attracted to what seemed to be a fetish for him.
"Not exactly, but thinking," she replied. Her voice was calm and sad, just like her dark eyes.
- In what?
-What is the cause of all this: God's purpose or the machinations of men?
"God is a fallacy that the machinations of men have created to evade responsibility," I replied immediately, as if our thoughts had been in sync since before we met.
-She says "men" in a gendered sense, I think. Women also wreak havoc, perhaps not as catastrophic in the immediate future, but certainly in the long run.
-That's true, sir…
-Dr. Bernardo Ruiz, miss. You must be from Radar, I saw you talking to Beltrame. Do you also write fiction?
I couldn't help but let out a short laugh, which I tried to hide by covering my mouth in case others were looking. There were photographers everywhere.
"I accept the challenge, doctor. And what are you doing here?" I realized my own stupidity, but also the confusion that man caused me.
He shrugged and opened his arms as if to show the obvious.

-Some forensic expertise, if you can call it that, for the provincial government.
We looked at each other for a while, in silence, then he bent over the dead foot. He took off the shoe and the sock. The foot of a ten-year-old boy, white, covered in dried blood, with toes ending in long tendons like severed strings, which nevertheless sounded in the silence like a guitar strummed by the fingers of iron or steel, the elements of quick and less painful death, the death of the blade.

2

That's how I met Bernardo, but that's another story. I got home late, around two in the morning. I'd stopped by the newsroom and started comparing my notes with my colleagues'. We agreed to write different articles, and I got, as always, the sentimental piece. But there in my memory were the words and faces of the women talking and crying, and the doctors—I thought of Ruiz—with their astonishing coldness masking the utter bewilderment in their souls. Mom was already asleep; she was used to all of that. After all, she'd once been a left-wing protester in the Plaza de Mayo, waving sticks that looked like sickles.
When I had already gone to bed, exhausted, I heard her say to me from her room:
-Your friend called several times, she seemed very distressed.
Renato grunted and Mom answered him with a monosyllable.
"Who?" I asked.
-A certain Graciela.
I didn't think much about it; I couldn't remember anyone by that name, and I was overcome by exhaustion. But at 3:30, the phone rang. I'm a light sleeper; I rest, but I stay alert, and that's increased since I started working at the newspaper. It was for me, obviously. Some new whim of Bautista's.
-I'll go, Mom.

I got up and went to the dining room where the telephone was on a tall wooden table, with a knitted tablecloth bought in Cordoba and a notebook with a pen tied with a thread.

-Hello.

I heard a woman's relieved cry. I let her finish, and she said:

- Cecilia! They killed them, they killed my boys!

There's no point in describing the whole conversation, a back-and-forth of disjointed messages that gradually became more coherent as I understood who she was and what she was talking about, and as she arranged her ideas until they took shape. We talked for a long time, me sitting on the sofa as far as the phone cord reached. When I hung up, it was already dawn. I went to bed watching my father Renato's face as he went to the bathroom in long underwear, his pale chest with sparse hair, looking at me with pity and anger at the same time. I would have a quick breakfast and leave to catch the bus to the school where I taught; my mother would continue sleeping until nine, when she would do the essential housework before starting her afternoon shift. The history teacher and the elementary school teacher—those were my parents, and I fell asleep thinking about the parents who were no longer parents because their children were dead.

I woke up late, perhaps at the same time the accident had happened twenty-four hours earlier. I saw the light pouring in through the curtain I'd left open the previous afternoon. I heard the silence of the house. It must have been midday because none of them were there; Mom always left for school early, worried about being late. Customs, I told myself, extinct, eradicated, or killed by apathy. And I thought about the madmen who cling to these remnants of the old days as if holding onto a safe-conduct pass, to the point of obsession. But obsession can be salvation or suicide.

I ate breakfast while leafing through the morning paper. Everything was very neat, as one would expect from a non-sensationalist newspaper, which maintained its third-place sales position precisely because of that. One had to give Beltrame credit for something, that intuition for what was appropriate and discreet. Conservatism to the exact point of being humanistic. Beyond that, uncertainty. Closer, the seemingly certain. Because not even he knew what the others—they—wanted, expected, planned. His own hands, as

newspaper editor, were tied, or anchored at the bottom of a muddy river. The river into which the dead were thrown, and the excrement of the living. The river that flowed so slowly toward the sea because it couldn't carry the weight of the years. And when the waters finally reached the sea, the immensity wasn't a relief, but the sorrow of nothingness, the complicity of silence, and the gag on the mouth.

The phone conversation in the early hours of the morning felt surreal, as if I'd fallen asleep watching a movie on TV. I remembered Graciela, but I'd almost forgotten her after all these years. We'd gone to high school together because her parents lived in Buenos Aires back then. Now she lived in Quilmes, very close to the railroad crossing where the accident happened. That's why she was calling. Two of her private students had died. At first, I thought that was the end of it, but I didn't understand why she was reaching out to me after not seeing each other for so long—almost ten years had passed. I managed to understand, after calming her down and getting her to sit down—I suppose she did, in a chair by the phone in her Quilmes home—that she gave drawing and painting lessons. She'd known the boys for two years and had grown fond of them. I thought I'd come to terms with the words of sadness I received and the comfort I had to offer, but she soon confused me again.

"They killed them," he told me.

-I don't understand what you mean…

"The Dark Ones killed them because they're jealous; they always do the same thing. They kill the ones I love."

I took a deep breath and remember picturing her sitting tensely, her body rigid, her hand gripping the telephone receiver as if it were a piece of iron. She was blonde, verging on red, and had many freckles, at least when I met her. She was pretty, yes, but very shy; the other girls called her "princess" because of her aloof nature. She was an individualist—few understand that at that age, and even fewer later, I think. They're the ones who feel comfortable being alone because they have such a vast inner world that it's always in danger of overflowing, and when that happens, they call it madness.

That same day the phone rang several times again. I let the first few attempts go by, because I knew it was her. I had decided to ignore her, but a pang of remorse gnawed at me. Finally, on the fifth call in less than an hour, I

answered. She sounded calmer, and she asked if I could join her at the boys' wake that afternoon. I couldn't refuse, and it was also the perfect opportunity for another article. The words had been piling up in my head since the night before. Beltrame was always right when he said that tragedy suited me, like mourning did for Elektra. We agreed to meet at her house. I notified the newsroom and overheard Bautista expressing his satisfaction at having his intuitions about my talents confirmed—and he wasn't referring to my literary ones. I left him convinced of that because I wasn't convinced otherwise.
I went to the door when Dr. Ruiz's car arrived. He had called a couple of times that afternoon, some of the people I thought were Graciela's. That was the first time we went out together, to a wake.

During the trip, I told him I was surprised we were traveling in a brand-new Torino, something unexpected given the formality of a doctor. He said that ever since he could remember, he'd tried to do everything that wasn't expected of him, but he'd always succumbed to convention. His father, a rural doctor but also a rancher with a military-like rigidity, had instilled in him a sense of responsibility and guilt. He couldn't shake the latter, especially. In time, I would come to understand that he was right, because he knew his own limitations better than anyone: he imposed them on himself. And the Torino, obviously, would also succumb, sooner or later.
We arrived at Graciela's house, an English-style house, not very large but very well-kept, with a narrow, tall facade and a roof shaded by two pine trees. We rang the doorbell and heard footsteps on the wooden floor, which I imagined to be polished and shiny. A thin man with broad shoulders opened the door; his arms were strong, judging by the hands with which he shook ours.
-Good afternoon, Cecilia. Thank you very much for coming.
As I introduced him to Dr. Ruiz, I wondered who this man was who was treating me so familiarly.
"Don't you remember me?" he asked, smiling at me. "I'm Leandro's brother."
- Excuse me , it's been so long... but I don't think I really knew you that well.
-My parents were separated since we were kids, I lived with my dad in Haedo and Leandro with my mom.

As he invited us to sit, I looked around, noticing the wooden floor, dull and chipped in the corners, and especially the countless ornaments and things I couldn't quite describe on the shelves: porcelain, dolls of all kinds, materials, and sizes, plates hanging on the walls, vases of every shape, little elves and trolls peeking out from among the books in an overflowing library. I saw Ruiz looking at the same thing, and we exchanged worried glances, remembering the brief conversation we'd had about Graciela.

Ricardo waited a moment, as if embarrassed by all these trinkets that trivialized the house's noble interior. The walls were covered with paintings, some reproductions that could be found in any dentist's or lawyer's waiting room, but others were originals by Graciela. I saw her signature, and I appreciated them. They were muted in color, with indistinct figures, men or animals, and the landscapes were mostly nothing more than a mixture of shadows in every possible shade of gray. And that represented talent, I thought. Finding new ways to represent the countless forms of sadness.

-I remember the dance we did to raise funds for the graduation trip, it was in Morón, I think, at my cousin's country house.

Ricardo laughed, patting his thigh with glee. He was wearing a blue suit that he shouldn't wear except to wakes and weddings, with patches on the elbows and knees showing dangerous signs of wear.

"How could I forget! Leandro invited me, and since we both arrived at my house in the early hours of the morning, we stayed the whole weekend. On Monday, Dad and I took Leandro to my mom's house, who was angry with everyone, and of course with Dad. They argued in the middle of the street. Leandro and I, who didn't see each other much, ran back to Leticia's. That country house was beautiful, almost all fields alongside the Sarmiento railway tracks. She sheltered us, so to speak, in one of the sheds, which served as a plant nursery and carpentry workshop. We stayed all week, until my dad came looking for us, angry too, because we hadn't told him anything—he even brought a policeman. I think it was Oscar, the gardener, who ratted us out. He was a bit of a crazy guy and always irritable, but he had pornographic photos that he showed us every night that week. When Dad found out, there was a huge fight with Leticia's parents." After he was fired for that reason, I suppose, he joined the collective, I think.

Bernardo was enjoying the anecdote while I was wondering where Graciela could be, that this man was wasting time, delaying the visit to the wake as much as possible.
Ruiz said, frowning, his dark beard contrasting sharply with the other man's brown, almost blond hair, his light eyes resembling Leandro's, but nothing more.
- Excuse me , Ricardo, but I was thinking...it's surely a coincidence...it can't be that much of a coincidence... What was the last name of that Oscar, the gardener?
"That'll kill me, I don't think I ever found out... although... wait ." He rubbed his chin and ran a hand through his hair, unknowingly ruffling it. He snapped his fingers and said:
- Méndez! Now I remember, look how things are, after having forgotten them for so long, just now, when you least expect it…
I liked her simplicity. Her logic was clear, and she possessed the necessary naiveté to marvel at the world without trying to fix it. Acceptance is a form of wisdom. She did maintenance work, all kinds of things. There, at Graciela's house, she had come to wallpaper the walls and lay carpets, and she had stayed to fix everything, except for that woman she liked too much to change. Graciela's distinction wasn't in her outward appearance, but in what she concealed and which was reflected in her paintings.
I was about to ask about her once and for all when Ruiz interrupted me, placing a hand on mine. A sign of affection that this time was nothing more than a professional gesture.
"It's the driver, Cecilia, I'm sure of it. The same age..." And turning back to Ricardo, he said: "Do you have today's newspaper?"
-Yes, it was at the door this morning, but I hid it so she wouldn't…
He went to the kitchen to get it and came back. Ruiz opened it and looked through the photos. He placed it on the small table after moving aside a pile of trinkets.
- Is this it?
-The same guy, a few years older and fatter, but the same round face like the moon. I'll remember the face he used to make at Leandro and me. When they kicked him out, my dad told us that the policeman he came with said that

Méndez had been in jail several times, for drunkenness, but also for weird stuff with kids…you know what I mean.
So that was the school bus driver, I told myself then. She looked at the other two, who had fallen silent, not because of me, but because they were watching Graciela, who was coming down the stairs, and probably hearing everything. She was wearing a simple black dress, her long hair loose, less reddish than before, but with a sooty tint that highlighted her freckles and her light eyes, an indefinable blue. She came over to us and hugged me for a while. The men cleared their throats, as they almost always do when they're uncomfortable, but we hugged each other as if ten years hadn't passed, and as if an affinity had even been growing in that time that hadn't existed before.
"Thank you," she said in a very low voice. She sat down on the sofa next to her boyfriend, or at least that's what I assumed he was; I didn't even know how long they'd known each other. Ricardo moved aside the useless cushions, stuffed animals, and other knick-knacks, and made room for her.
"And what happened to that man?" he asked.
"He's dead," Ruiz said. "A colleague must be performing the autopsy at the judge's request, in case he was drunk or something."
I mentally noted the detail to elaborate on later: how could a man with his background have been hired by the school? Should I blame the municipality, the province? I could already see Beltrame was going to challenge me: he didn't like rebellious, free-thinking women. Or rather, he liked them too much, and that's why he confronted them: he was afraid of them. Rumor had it that a left-wing protester was his lover. I didn't believe it, but you see many improbable things in the world, and these are almost always the most likely.
"I think we need to leave if we don't want to be late," Ricardo said.
"And who's going to leave?" she asked him. "The dead will still be here. I'm not going to see them anymore. What about you?"

The main hall of the Municipal building was set up as a funeral parlor. The fourteen coffins were arranged in two rows of seven, facing each other, separated by the large space where people stood, whispering and weeping, surrounded by dozens of wreaths of all prices: from the school board, the parent-teacher association, the principal and teachers, the parents of children

in other grades, the mayor and the governor, and even the president. It was so crowded and the heaters were so hot that I saw many people with sweaty foreheads, but no one dared to protest.

We walked, pushing our way through the crowd, but were stopped by a couple of men I recognized as plainclothes police officers. Ruiz showed his doctor's ID and they let us through. There were lists, of course, but the mayor had given orders that no resident should be denied entry. Good election manners, I thought to myself, watching the provincial governor mingling with the municipal authorities and slowly and deliberately offering his condolences to each of the parents of the dead children. Almost all of them were married, but there were a couple of single women and several single men, widowed, separated, divorced, or simply single, who had raised a child only to give them up to the train tracks. I imagined the parallel path of those steel beams that nevertheless converged on the imprecise horizon of distance, which is also time. Or is it that time stops, but distance is countless and infinite? One is individual time, but there is no other, I tell myself. There is nothing but one's own perception of time. Whether it continues after our death is neither known nor does it matter to us. But distance is another matter, I think. Space persists because our body persists, even though it is no longer alive, even though it inevitably decays, and yet the flesh turns into worms and the bones endure, and that is why they occupy the space of what was once our body. A coffin is more than a box that protects the living from our putrefaction; it is a symbol: like the music box that Mom kept in her bedroom dresser, where she put the earrings, rings, and cheap necklaces she wore to teach or occasionally go to the theater.

Graciela walked arm in arm with Ricardo, glancing at the parents, perhaps hoping they would recognize her, without her having to approach and interrupt the grief that was constantly interrupted by everyone else, those who, like her, lacked discretion and consideration, the respect for the silence that pain needs to express itself and become something more than a crude or exasperated cry. True pain is perhaps bitterness, solemn in its silence, or anguish, discreet in its expression. And no matter how much despair calls to them with cries and frantic gestures, they will not answer.

We stopped in front of the coffins. Each one had a name. Leonardo, Lucas, Analía, Florencia, and several others, up to fourteen. None repeated, as if providence had wisely distributed names to death. That's what doubles were for. God, I said to myself, why these disquisitions at this moment? What drives me to philosophize absurdly with such deleterious elements as numbers and names? But they are everything. Numbers determine the reality that determines us: the quantity of our cells first, and the quantity of our days, ultimately. And our name is a prefix that we can come to hate, reject, and abolish, but that will always be present like the god of the margins, staring with the obtuse face of a bewildered mother, because that name is the symbol of a destiny imagined for nine months and many years. A name contains the soul, and that's why they say that when the dead are named, they are called, and they cannot rest. Is oblivion peace, then?

Many were smoking, and beneath the ceiling, thick halos of smoke had formed, like clouds from which the recently deceased cherubs gazed down at us. I laughed, imagining a speech that I was nevertheless hearing quite clearly. The school principal, an old Catholic, sly and in cahoots with the military regime, was delivering her unbearable oratory with execrable poetic devices. She was even declaiming, histrionic, with jet-black hair pulled back in a tight bun and red lips on her wrinkled face. I didn't know where to hide, I was so embarrassed for her. Ricardo and Bernardo were smiling, Graciela was crying.

When that torture ended, another one followed, this time from the mayor, which earned lukewarm applause and was initiated by one of his aides. Then a teacher spoke on behalf of all the students, and finally the flag bearers entered. It was the last straw, and no one wanted to admit whose idea it was. Even the principal seemed to wash her hands of it when she saw the children enter the room, hunched over under the weight of the national and papal flags. The poor things looked so distraught they didn't know where to look. They were terrified of the coffins and sought help from the others, but the living averted their gazes, because they had forgotten about them, about telling them not to go in, about notifying anyone that it wasn't necessary, so late, in the heat and smoke, with so much death lurking about.

The smell of the flowers became unbearable, even more so than the memory of the old woman's dreadful poems. They smelled it because they were looking at the wreaths overflowing with flowers: jasmine, roses, daisies, calla lilies—anything people could find in the neighborhood flower shops, which that week earned more money than in a whole year. Then, several weeks later, they said the municipality had paid for everything, and then came the praise in the press, on television, and in the official speeches. No one had lost money, and seen this way, even the parents were saving themselves the expense the dead would have caused had they lived. But it wasn't cynicism that hung in the air, taking advantage of the cracks between the smoke and the vapor of decay, but rather the color of reality, the hue of cemetery flowers at that point where they wither but never truly die, the precise moment when life mocks death.

Graciela approached one of the coffins. By mutual agreement of the parents, all the bodies were being viewed with closed caskets. Some were badly injured and it wasn't pleasant to display them, and others were simply fragments of bodies found on the tracks. I heard from the room that one coffin was empty, but had a name engraved on the plaque. Graciela placed one hand on the lid and the other on the coffin next to it. By chance, her two students were sitting side by side, just like when they came to her house for drawing lessons, with their folders and tempera paint sets. I went over to her and took her by the shoulders; I was afraid she might faint, but then she looked ahead, toward the wall where there was nothing but darkness. Beyond the candles beside each coffin and the mournful light of the plaques on the walls, there was nothing, and even the smoke was dark except when it caught the beam of a light. In those slow eddies, as if drawn in the air, she saw something, and raised an arm, pointing with her index finger at a spot uncertain to everyone but her. Or was it not quite like that? Did I see something, or was it just my imagination?

"The Dark Ones," he said.

Ricardo approached and tried to pull her away. She shook off his grasp. I saw that Ricardo knew what this was all about; he had witnessed it more than once. I recognized in him the man she needed, because she was different, and he had to be different too. That ordinary man who reconciled his outward

appearance, his way of speaking, and his looks with what the world expected of him was nothing more than another facet of the charade we all construct throughout our lives. Distinction is palpable, like a rock, when the precise moment arrives. That's what they were: the balance between the boat and the sea, or the rain on a roof, or the dust settled on the books. The exact measure between patience and love. I found no definitions, just as there are no numbers for certain things. Death is precise, but life is eclectic. Life often lies.

Then I saw clearly, as clearly as the smoke from cigarettes and candles allowed after so many hours, and the dim light that grew ever more somber as the afternoon wore on and night fell, the figures of three men who seemed just three of the many others in the room, coming and going or pacing with weary, bored steps, eager to leave, no doubt, but afraid of what others might say. These three, however, were not together, but close enough for a glance to unite them into a single group. So different from one another, yet bound together by an uncertain factor of coincidences that were not coincidences at all. Graciela was observing the three of them as if she were seeing only one. Two were at the foot of each of the coffins she had approached; the other was in the middle, a little farther away and therefore closer to the darkness on the wall, where there was a ceiling light fixture with a dim, chalice-shaped lamp. The other two were dimly lit by two candles whose flames moved with the movement of people here and there.

The one on the left wore a suit and tie; he was burly, but unlike other muscular men, the suit fit him well. He held a glass in his hands, hiding his gaze behind it as he raised it to his lips, and sometimes he glanced up as if spying around. The one in the middle was thin and blond, his hair almost ashen in the candlelight. He stared straight ahead, but as if he saw nothing. He had an aquiline nose and an attractive face, and wore jeans and a turtleneck. The one on the right was shorter, with a round face, and looked like a shy boy, lost in a perpetual adolescent tantrum. His gaze darted from side to side, his arms always crossed, searching for something he seemed to miss. He wore twill trousers and a corduroy shirt, old clothes for a young body. What was the age of their souls? I wondered. They all seemed more like presences than human beings, entities, I mean. Forms that could

metamorphose at any moment. They barely moved. One with his hands occupied with a glass whose contents never ran out, another with his hands behind his back and looking straight ahead, towards whatever his prominent nose pointed to in the infinite distance, and the third with his hands on his chest like a shield, looking around for reinforcements that were no longer there.

But no one seemed to notice them, and they weren't looking at anyone in particular either. You could almost say they'd been motionless, perhaps since the beginning of the wake, and only our gaze had discovered them by chance, or rather, Graciela's gaze. And undoubtedly, from her growing, desperate excitement, she knew they were somewhere in that room, and seeing them confirmed the injustice of her premonition. She covered her face and began to weep almost aloud, shaking her head and saying "no, no!" in a loud voice, muffled by her hands. She knew they thought she was crazy, and that exasperated her even more. Ricardo held her close and let all her weeping and shouting be hidden by her body, and I saw how his face transformed into a grimace of anguish, of fragile tolerance, and then into bitterness. That bitterness which is more stable than all other feelings, perennial, unshakeable like a fortress built in the middle of the desert.

She glanced toward the men, but I'm not sure she saw them. If she had, I assumed she would have gone to confront them, but I think that even if she had, she and her despair were all that mattered at that moment. He led her toward the exit, crossing the room through the people who stared and pitied them. I didn't go with them because I saw Bernardo walk toward one of the men, the one on the left. And then it dawned on me, realizing I'd let myself be carried away by my usual stupid fantasy. Those men were men. To say less would have been to dishonor them, but also to exonerate them, and I sensed that those men wouldn't be forgiven because they wouldn't forgive themselves.

I saw Bernardo's expression, and I was afraid for him. Suddenly, I saw him as a knight errant defying the enemies who had wronged women. The legend of Prince Charming comes from within us, ingrained along with so many other learned absurdities, like a protective shield, invisible yet effective in carrying us through our lives as women, concealing its power beneath a veil of fantasy.

Sometimes, a man, however foolish, is the salvation of our psyche, the balance between despair and coldness. A good man, above all, but there are no good men, there are only men.
And Bernardo was the one who had saved a boy amidst the irreversible tragedy of so many others, and I had admired him since the day before, when I learned of it, even though he hadn't told me anything during the entire car ride. I saw him approach the man on the left, who looked up, placed his glass on the coffin, and extended his hand to greet him. Ruiz kept his hands behind his back and spoke to him seriously. The other man, broader in build but not very tall, put his hands in his suit pockets and listened for a while. I couldn't understand what he was whispering.
When Ruiz came back to me, he said we should leave. Graciela and Ricardo were waiting for us on the sidewalk, surrounded by several people who had been worried about her. The four of us got into the car and started back. They got out, and we stayed for a while. Bernardo was nervous and had driven tensely and silently the whole time.
"Who was that man?" I asked.
-His name is Jesús Méndez, and he is my patient, or was for a while.
- Mendez?
-Yes, he's the driver's brother.
Bernardo was in profile, looking out the windshield. I could only see one side of his face at that moment, and I imagined that the other side looked different.
"You, who saved the life of one of the few boys who survived," was the only thing I could think to say, like an idiot, " you're the doctor of the brother of the one who killed all the others."
Then he looked at me straight on, and his face was a single one. There weren't two faces like in horror movies, but just one face in multiple layers.
-That's right, you see how things are? That's life, Cecilia.
He punctuated his sarcasm by grabbing one of my hands tightly and placing it on his crotch, and then the other on his beard.
"Do you like this, my love, my dearest love? This is health, my darling, the other is death. Can I choose? Can you ?"

He let go of me, and I instinctively put my hands on my skirt, protecting myself from a danger that didn't really exist. That man was crying, and I didn't want to admit it. He wouldn't hurt me. I moved closer and made him rest his head on my chest. Now he was crying.
- And what was he doing at the wake?
Bernardo spoke with his mouth almost touching my breasts, I felt the warmth of his breath and the roughness of his beard, and I felt good, as if I had arrived at a definitive place: a car, a street, a man between my legs, and the crying and sweat of winter turning spite into a radiance.
-He came to authorize the other man's autopsy and to pay his respects, even though no one would find out who he was.
"And who is he, or what is he?" I asked, playing on the professional bias that leads many doctors to consider a man a diagnosis. I knew that Ruiz combined clinical and psychiatric knowledge; that's why he was an expert witness.
"That whole family," he replied. "A bunch of lunatics."
We laughed, because there was no other alternative, and sometimes men are gods when they laugh.

3

We stayed in Quilmes for almost a week, lodging at Graciela's house. Since Bernardo had commitments related to the accident investigation, Ibáñez came to pick him up several times and brought him back late. We sometimes talked about Graciela, but neither of us ventured a diagnosis, more out of a sense of duty and discretion. I asked for permission at the newsroom, but it was obvious that such leave would come at the cost of several articles about the accident. I knew that the public's attention would soon wane and shift to other matters, and Beltrame told me that if I managed to write a full column for a week, I would get a promotion. He liked my style, a kind of good literature with colloquial touches that were easy to understand, and in the end, a grammatical breeze that blew on the most sensitive skin of the

intellect, or the soul, leaving the reader pondering. That metaphor was his, because he too is a good writer when he wants to be. I hung up the phone and went upstairs to see Graciela. She had been in bed since the afternoon we returned. She would wake up, sit up in bed to eat, or get up to go to the bathroom. Always silent, she would thank Ricardo and me with monosyllables, as we took turns keeping her company. He had maintenance work at other houses, so he would leave early and return at five-thirty, then I would go to rest or write.

When Graciela slept, I would sit in the armchair across from the bed, staring at the painting hanging on the wall. It was, of course, hers. And it depicted precisely the object of her obsession. The Dark Ones were three well-defined male figures, faceless, their faces blurred by the gloom of a suspended twilight. Mercury lamps lined the street where they walked, side by side, the middle one just a step behind or ahead, because that was the strange thing. Each time I looked at the painting, I couldn't remember if I had seen him ahead or behind the others the previous time. I was aware of this lapse in my memory, and during the days I was there, I resolved several times not to let the opportunity pass to clear up the confusion. But as soon as I laid eyes on the canvas, the memory vanished, becoming imprecise and ethereal like the certainty that inhabited that painting. Was that what Impressionism was all about? Perhaps, but unlike the works of that period, the landscape of the Obscure defied classification: concrete on its surface, it molded itself to the viewer's perspective. Nor could one tell whether the figures were facing forward or backward, coming or going from the end of the street, lost in the darkness of the background, as if disappearing into the wall, or passing through it.

It was a great painting, I'm sure of it, although I'm no expert and I judge by personal taste rather than painting technique. Graciela also knew it was the best thing she had ever done, and that's why she had hung it in her room on the white wall that received the light's impressions at all hours of the day, contributing to the painting's interplay of light and shadow. The painting, in another setting, wouldn't be the same. It was captivating. It was obsessively intrusive, drawing the attention of anyone who entered the room. By the second day, I realized I couldn't go in without observing the painting, and

then glancing at it briefly every now and then, as if checking that everything was in its place. And at times, especially during siesta, when the neighborhood was a graveyard of sounds and a desert where the breeze barely stirred the curtains, I thought I saw the figures move, just a little, imperceptibly. I fancied myself going to find a centimeter and measuring the distance between the figures and the edge of the painting every day, but every time I thought about it I realized I was in a half-dream, and my conviction transformed into such an exhausting game of sleep and wakefulness that when I finally woke up, it was already mid-afternoon and the only sane thought was to go downstairs to prepare a snack for both of us.

On Saturday, before returning home, we decided to say goodbye to them with a simple gathering. I told Ruiz, who was also working at the morgue that morning, not to worry. Ricardo wouldn't arrive until around five either. He was working a lot and looked tired, but I know that both of them kept their distance from us: from one of us they didn't understand, and from the other who understood too much. Was that how they saw us, or was that how we were?

I went out into the street with the shopping bag I'd found in the kitchen, rummaging through hundreds of useless things in the drawers and cupboards. My back even ached from bending over, searching and finding things I wasn't even looking for most of the time. I amused myself with this word game, which distracted me and eased my desperation as I searched for a treasure (the shopping bag) in the middle of an impenetrable jungle. How would we cook that night if we didn't have the slightest idea where to find the necessary ingredients? Until now, we'd settled for going to the deli. I passed so many people on the sidewalk asking about Graciela's health that it took me almost an hour to get to the nearest corner store. "Give her my regards," they said, "a kiss from me," others requested. But most people wore a somber expression, because they knew what Graciela was like, except for the children, and that's why they were the only ones who didn't ask about the art teacher. They walked along the sidewalk looking towards the balcony, scared if they were alone, whispering if they were with someone.

Then I saw a man on the corner, whom I barely noticed at first. He was standing there, smoking. He was blond, with curly hair, wearing worn jeans

and a black t-shirt. Distracted by the people who had stopped me along the way, I think I felt half-stupid listening to so much nonsense, and for a moment I thought I was in the middle of a French film, watching a Belmondo who would never have smiled. I crossed the street and walked the next block, wondering what I would buy. And on the next corner, I saw him again. I stopped, looked back; he wasn't there anymore, but I hadn't seen him go ahead either. I kept walking, worried, it's true, because I thought that my sense of distance was being distorted these days, starting with the painting and continuing with the street.

I checked the prices at the greengrocers and bought a few things. I was looking for a butcher shop so I could have a barbecue on the abandoned grill in the backyard of the old house. I crossed the street halfway down the block and saw the man again, almost in the same position, except now he was leaning more on his left foot than his right, or so it seemed to me, one hand in his pants pocket, though I wasn't sure if it was the same one as before, and smoking a cigarette that was perhaps a different one, because it was almost untouched. He looked at me as if he'd been expecting me, standing at the edge of the curb. I saw him throw the cigarette into the gutter and stretch out an arm. The joint sank into the wide puddle that would only allow me to jump onto the sidewalk. I looked at the hand he offered me, and I couldn't resist touching a vision that was as clear as the sun that Saturday and at the same time as ethereal as a film still. His face was as expressionless as a high-fashion model's, but without the right clothes, of course. It didn't even possess simple elegance, but rather the plainness of a middle-class neighborhood. The hand was thick and strong, white, with long fingers, and when I touched them, I felt the roughness of the scars.

"Thank you," I said.

He took his hand away, as if ashamed, and I too was ashamed of staring, absorbed like a capricious child, at the flaw of someone I passed on the sidewalk.

"Sorry," I said.

He looked at his hands, so different from the delicacy of his face. He wasn't handsome, but he was attractive. His hands didn't stand out much from his body, but they were the victims.

-I'm a butcher, and I've cut myself many times. Once with the saw, and many times with the knife.
"I'm so sorry..." I didn't want to move away so quickly; I thought it would be impolite, so I asked:
-I'm looking for a butcher shop, and since I'm not from the neighborhood...
-Me neither, miss. I'm from La Plata, I came for the wake.
It was him, I realized, one of the three men I had seen and who had frightened Graciela. The middle one, more precisely, except that under the deathly light from the ceiling fixture, his hair had gleamed like gold while his face remained in shadow.
- Did you know any of the boys?
-To my son, miss.
I was so embarrassed I didn't know where to hide. I would have buried my head between the sidewalk tiles like an urban ostrich.
-I'm so sorry...
"Don't worry, I didn't know him. I was seventeen when he was born, and his mother lied to me, saying she'd had an abortion."
- And her?
"I didn't see her at the wake or the funeral. She never wanted him, that's why she had an abortion, but they did it wrong. I heard she kept the baby, of course. They say she's still working at the same hair salon. I suppose she's happy."
Don't say that...
He shrugged and lit another cigarette.
-Well, I have to keep shopping. I offer my condolences.
I extended my hand to say goodbye, but he didn't dare touch me again. I saw something akin to resentment in his eyes: he looked at me as if he were looking at the mother of his child. And when I heard him speak, I felt like I was right there in the scene.
"I like you, miss, you're so different from Mara..."
"I have to go." I turned around quickly, clicking my heels on the sidewalk like a whore scared of a crazy, dangerous client.

4

Mario Marizza had gotten into the newspaper without anyone knowing how. He wasn't a kid when he started, but at first they gave him cadet-like tasks because he didn't know how to do anything. However, it later came out that he and Beltrame were very close friends, and it seems Mario had been fired when the ammunition factory in La Tablada closed. I don't know where they knew each other from, or maybe the military officers simply recommended that he look after Mario, who was related to military personnel. Over time, the guy started expressing his ideas to anyone who would listen—in the newsroom, the men's restroom, or the corner bar—and as we got to know him, we began to distance ourselves the more entrenched the power of the day became. I understood why he hadn't followed a military career like his relatives: his mind was filled with other ideas, not particularly original nor very firm; it was simply the structure he had adopted to avoid submitting to his family. And we—the newspaper, and especially Beltrame—were caught in the middle. The military didn't want to leave him unprotected; somewhere, there was an officer named Marizza who was subtly pulling the strings, because the dirty work was done by those below him. If the guy talked and let his guard down, if for any reason he crossed the line in his rebellion, there was the newspaper's atmosphere, which maintained the boundaries of decency, of what was considered proper. The newspaper, founded in times of socialism, had become conservative out of necessity, but it had maintained the quality and prestige of well-done journalism. That is to say, well-written, because that was enough to hide the apathy and filth that sprouted in the corridors like mold on the pages of old newspapers.

They tried him out as a photographer, but he didn't take any better pictures than a five-year-old. They tried him out as a writer, and he only did obituaries well, copying the same old template and changing the names depending on the occasion. When there was a space to fill, there was Mario, and Scarfionne had grown accustomed to his company. They were almost the same age, but Scarfionne had been a respected journalist for twenty years, and he bossed

Mario around like a "hey kid." One day Mario got fed up and told him to get lost, but the next day they went together to cover a police story in La Plata, and when they returned, something had happened between them, and we realized that Mario had used the very influence he boasted of wanting to escape.

Sarfionne and he arrived from La Plata the next morning, and Mario went to develop the photos, which he brought us immediately. He sat on the desk, getting his backside covered in the India ink that was still used for tracings and sketches. We didn't laugh, but he, as if nothing were amiss, launched into his story. He was a better storyteller than he was a writer, of course, but this time he'd gone too far with the photos. Among so many useless ones, there were some that looked like they'd been taken from a horror painting.

I thought about Graciela's painting. I wondered how she was doing, because more than twenty days had passed and neither of them had called. On the Saturday we said goodbye, she had gotten up, put on some makeup, and come down to the patio for dinner. She ate and drank, laughed at our stories, and we didn't mention the dead or the ghosts. She said she would resume classes the following Monday. Ricardo asked her if she didn't want to take more time off. She declined; she thought it would be good for her to be with other kids.

Then we returned to Buenos Aires. Bernardo and I looked for a place to live together. We found one in Barracas after selling the Torino. Now I took the bus to the hospital, but I was happy.

Marizza told us they had found the house where a man was said to have kept his father locked up for fourteen years. The old man was bedridden, malnourished, and dehydrated. When the police tried to get him to talk, he babbled and drooled. After several attempts, they only managed to understand one word he repeated like a mantra: "Dog," he kept saying, "Dog."

"Guess what was going on? The guy, the owner of the house, was kind of a nutcase who only kept up appearances so far. He'd go to and from work in an old suit, no tie, and with the day's newspaper still unopened. He'd stop by the bakery every afternoon and chat with the baker, who was kind of like his girlfriend. Poor girl, if she'd known, she would have shut the door on him when he saw him get off the bus and walk toward the shop. Anyway, this guy had a dog, and one day it died. He wandered around the neighborhood like a

lost soul, and they even saw him crying, leaning on the bakery counter. This girl comforted him, as you'd expect. She went to the house, and you see, the guy was a bit of a scoundrel, but not stupid..." Mario made a gesture of sticking a finger in a hole.

Scarfionne watched him from his desk, glasses perched on the tip of his nose, lamenting the colleague he was forced to put up with. The other men, however, applauded his obscenity and looked at me, because I was the only woman in that group of idiots. I said nothing, I smiled, easygoing and friendly. Beltrame listened from the doorway of his office, his arms crossed. I glanced at him for a moment and saw the look of contempt on his face. Guilt, he must be thinking. The road to hell must sound to him like the incessant clatter of typewriters.

"Keep telling the story," he told her.

-Well, this woman was looking after his house, and while she was making the bed and all that, she thought of giving the good man another dog to comfort him; it seems the guy wasn't satisfied with just the female one…

Oh God, I thought, wishing He existed and would strike Mario with lightning.

"And why did he have the old man locked up?" one of the group asked.

-Because it seems he killed the woman in an exemplary beating, and from what we've heard, the old man had several deaths on his conscience.

"And what was his name?" Braulio asked.

-Commissioner Pascual Ansaldi.

A murmur arose among us. We knew it was a military family, and the brother was a colonel to be wary of, even if only half of what was said was true.

"And you know , Braulio, my dear, what they told us at the station? Hey, Scarfionne , deny it if it isn't true!" he shouted as if the desk weren't fifty centimeters away. "I had a grudge against faggots, so you better watch out , my dear..."

He laughed without expecting anyone to join him, but some did. He rubbed his face, tired, and said he was going home to sleep. And if he hadn't approached me, perhaps I wouldn't have known what I later learned, and I wouldn't have worried or drawn the conclusions that, nevertheless, didn't prevent the tragedies that would come later. As always, the truth is useless,

only serving to create a world of false consciousness where we can hide from inevitable catastrophes after they've already happened.
-Hey, Ceci, they told me about your concubinage...
And the son of a bitch laughed, however, his malice did not take away his sense of justice.
-I'm glad you caught the doctor.
-Thanks Mario, and tell me, what did they do with this guy, not the old man, but the son?
- Oh dear! I forgot to tell you. Ceci escaped, or they left the police station door open for her, and how could it be otherwise, coming from where she came from?
He winked at me and left, his shirt half untucked and his jacket slung over his right shoulder. He waited for the elevator that would take him to the sidewalk on Diagonal Norte and walked yawning toward some bar on Corrientes to sit in a corner and fall asleep.
I approached the desk where the photos were scattered about; Scarfionne had already chosen the ones she needed for the article. Mario had taken many duplicates, and among them was the one of the man. I held the photo up to eye level and examined it as if I were looking at a painting on the wall. I was sure of what I was seeing, and I told myself that I now had the three identities of the Dark Ones. The photo was of the third one, the one on the left, the man with the face of an angry teenager who wore old-fashioned clothes and occasionally looked down. Now I knew what I was looking for: the dead dog. His name was Tomás Ansaldi.

5

For two months I heard almost nothing from them—from Graciela and her boyfriend. The few times I managed to get them to answer the phone, they seemed distant and distracted. Once, while I was talking to him, Graciela's voice interrupted, and he silenced her, irritated. I know she wasn't easy to

live with. Her obsessive fantasies about the supposed Dark Ones were unsettling because she didn't try to convince anyone; she simply mentioned them as casually as one might talk about the corner grocer. The plausibility was so implicit in her discourse that anyone who spoke with her found themselves thinking the same way, at least for a moment, as if it were contagious. She seemed to undermine the foundations of formal logic and bend them to her will. And that's what worried me most: her conviction was so precise and unwavering that she could easily have been diagnosed as schizophrenic. The love-fear dichotomy was evident, which is why I always had the impression that it wasn't love that bound her to Ricardo, but a kind of protective need.

I learned from others that he no longer lived in the mansion. Some neighbors, whose talent for gossip was the only thing that proved useful to me in those circumstances, told me over the phone that he would visit her from time to time, but he always left banging on the door, sometimes annoyed and grumbling, other times downcast like a man about to cry.

By the end of November, Bernardo and I had finally settled into our house in Barracas. It was a working-class neighborhood, most of the residents working in the barracks along the Riachuelo River, but our house was spacious, a single-story home with many flowerbeds filled with geraniums, jasmine, and countless shrubs I never recognized; I simply let them grow because I liked them. I wrote most of my articles from home, but the economy was now suffering the most severe ravages of inflation, and the lack of pay was inversely proportional to the amount of work we had. Social demonstrations by the workers' unions, almost entirely, if not entirely, left-wing, were becoming more and more frequent, and government repression left people wounded and dead every week. The name of Beltrame's alleged lover surfaced sporadically in the news, but I was assigned to patrol the less dangerous neighborhoods. And that kind of discrimination didn't bother me at the time: I was afraid, I had no weapons, and I was a woman. Three things compelled me to retreat into the anonymity of suburban streets, where women stroll about shopping, listening and whispering, observing things without interfering. They have children, grandchildren, nephews. There are bombs downtown that explode meters from the Obelisk or the Congress

building. Stray bullets from cars can kill a boy crossing the street. For those who sought danger, it was everywhere, and also for those who didn't look for it. And then I realized I didn't need to run down Rivadavia amidst gunfire and bombs: there in Barracas, old people could easily die, and young men fell on the cobblestones, still clutching a stone in their fist.

One night, I think it was four in the morning, the phone rang. I don't know how long it had been ringing, but Bernardo was tired and must have thought it was the hospital calling. Since he didn't answer, I assumed he was asleep or simply ignoring the ringing. I got up and answered it. A desperate voice sank into my ear. It was Ricardo; I finally recognized the inflections of his voice amidst his stuttering and sobbing.

- What happened, for God's sake, calm down ?

"To Graciela…" he said, trying hard to calm down, but he found it difficult to continue.

"What happened to them?" Those two had me on edge ever since we started seeing them. Every time the phone rang, my heart would leap, thinking something had happened to them. She was a ticking time bomb, and he was the detonator.

-She was raped.

That same morning I went there. Bernardo hadn't found a replacement at the hospital, and I told him not to worry, but he always felt obligated when it involved someone he knew.

When I arrived at the house, the police had left ten minutes earlier. Graciela was in her room. Ricardo greeted me with his long, disheveled hair. I noticed he groaned a little when he shook my hand.

-It's nothing, one of the guys pushed me when he ran away.

"One…?" was my only reaction.

Then he told me what he had seen. He no longer lived in the house, but he loved Graciela and visited her almost every day because she wasn't well. The classes hadn't been successful; the children complained to their parents that the teacher was distracted and talked to herself. A commotion erupted when a mother came to complain in person, banging on the door and threatening to call the police. He had seen the drawings Graciela had her son do: figures of men that she considered nude, although they were simply sketches, lines

without details. Ricardo showed them to me because they filled the folders Graciela used as models. But then he showed me her notebook, the one she used for preliminary sketches for her paintings. In all of them were the Dark Ones, in different poses, with the three classic builds of any man. And they precisely matched, at least approximately, the types we had seen at the wake. I didn't mention it to Ricardo, because I realized that I myself was falling into the same obsession, and the path it had led me down was so logical that I was ashamed of myself.

He told me that last night he'd arrived after midnight, as he almost always did, to check on her. Since she wasn't teaching anymore, she did little more than paint and eat very little. On the sidewalk, he passed two men whose faces he couldn't see. It seemed strange to him at that hour, and he had the feeling they'd passed very close to the gate of the house. What if they'd left? He went inside and ran up the stairs. Graciela was on the floor, her back against the side of the bed. Her face was purple, her underwear was torn, but she wasn't crying.

-When he saw me, he stroked my face and told me that they were angry, that they were jealous because of me.

But a man emerged from some corner where he had been hiding, and ran past, pushing him and knocking him to the ground. Ricardo only caught a glimpse of someone's strong shadow as he stepped onto the balcony and threw himself onto the tree that stretched its branches right there next to the railing. He heard a couple of branches snap and then quick, heavy footsteps on the sidewalk, until they disappeared.

She had seen nothing but shadows, but a shadow doesn't leave bruises or pain on the body. Then she stopped herself, because she was afraid of what she was going to say.

- Did you take her to the hospital?

-She didn't want to.

-But the police...

She started screaming that they were going to kill her, that everything that had happened that night had been a warning, nothing more. The police didn't press the issue; I don't think they believed her at all, not even when I told them...

- That?
-The Dark Ones, Cecilia, are no longer in the picture.
"Oh, God!" I said to myself, filled with weariness and helplessness, rubbing my face with my hands. I prepared to climb the stairs, trying to draw conclusions that would steer me away from the nonsense in that madhouse. Could it be that all three men were guilty? Méndez and Benítez had relatives connected to the accident, but what was Ansaldi, the third man, doing at the wake? Besides, I had no evidence that they knew each other, and I couldn't find any reason why they would harbor resentment or seek revenge against Graciela. Then, staring intently at the steps of the staircase as if following the path of my reasoning, it occurred to me to suspect Ricardo. What if it was him?
But when I entered the room, all those hypotheses vanished, some because they were impossible, others because they were absurd. The room was dark. I went to the balcony, with its broken windowpane, and lifted the heavy, creaking wooden curtains. Graciela was in bed, wrapped in a blanket.
"Hello, Grace," I said, because she liked being called that in English.
She opened her eyes. They were bruised, as were her arms. I pulled back the sheets a little and saw that she was still naked, her pelvis burned by cigarettes and covered in bruises.
"Don't talk if it hurts, Grace. Sleep, it'll do you good."
Ricardo was watching us from the doorway, but then I realized he was actually staring at the wall. When I did, I froze, as if surrounded by a crowd, each person armed. It wasn't fear, it was terror, a chill that was actually the cold morning wind blowing in through the balcony. The foliage was rustling, and I heard the crackling of broken branches still hanging almost level with the sidewalk.
I gazed at the painting as if I were seeing it for the first time, because that's what it was. Was it another painting? It had to be, logic told me. But it was exactly the same, except for the absence of the three figures. I disguised my astonishment by asking:
- Did they change it?
-It's the same one. The men disappeared last night, when this happened.

"Don't be an idiot, you mean they came out of the fabric and raped her? You're crazier than..." I covered my mouth and bit my lip. Stupid, I told myself.
We went back downstairs and sat down at the kitchen table.
- Do you know any Ansaldis here in Quilmes, or in the southern area?
Ricardo looked up from the cup of coffee I had prepared for him. He had dark circles under his eyes; he looked haggard.
-Colonel Ansaldi, from Berazategui?
- Maybe, do you have family in La Plata?
-All the military personnel in the southern zone know each other; it's full of barracks and training centers. They own many fields.
- Did you see any of them at the wake?
-Many. There are many Ansaldis, and they're related through marriage as well. Those who don't have that name have it because their surname comes from their mother's side. I thought you knew that, because of your work, I mean. The boy Bernardo saved escaped from the hospital. They still haven't found him, and I don't think they will. Around here, they say the Ansaldis took him.
- Why? Oh God, I'm getting stupider every day!
Who knows ! Trafficking, Cecilia, the selling of bodies, of children. You know …
-But Graciela was really raped, wasn't she?
She glared at me with hatred; those pale eyes held one of the fiercest angers I had ever seen. She stood up and smashed the cup. Coffee splattered the table and my clothes.
- Of course she was raped! Come here!
He grabbed my wrist tightly and forced me to go upstairs to the bedroom. Without letting go, he pulled back the sheet and undressed Graciela.
Look at her vagina and tell me if you, as a woman , don't recognize the signs of rape! Or do you think she and I imagined it all?
He led me to where the painting was.
-The same shitty painting, Graciela's artwork. I saw it, all three of them, standing there motionless the whole time I came into this house. And every day I saw them moving forward, a little at a time, until finally…

He let go of me and knelt on the rug. His shirt was open, his hands trying to stop his body from trembling. His face was contorted with anguish. Then he went back to the bed and quickly covered Graciela, who was still asleep. He lay down beside her, holding her close, reciting something like a litany.
I left the room, unconcerned about my bruised wrist. I was only thinking about what she had told me: that movement of the men in the painting. What I believed to be my own imagination was also theirs. Reality is, perhaps, the result, through a still unknown series of mathematical, alchemical, or simply physical mechanisms, of the totality of fantasies ever imagined.

I stayed as long as the strained relationship between Ricardo and me allowed. I spoke to the newsroom daily, and Beltrame, in exchange for letting me be absent, asked me to send him articles about the rape, the attack, or whatever it was, and about the insecurity and crime in the greater Buenos Aires area. I came to see the situation not as a betrayal of my friends, but rather that, besides needing to calm myself by doing what I enjoy, which is thinking and writing, I believed I was helping to clarify the murky waters a little. I didn't intend to stir up a hornet's nest; I saw it as too dangerous, and what had happened in that house in Quilmes was simply an isolated and accidental incident, or what are usually called collateral effects, of a general situation that had very deep roots in the Argentine psyche. A *Frankensteinian* product , if I may use the word, of vanity, laziness, and social frustration, mixed with the usual and inevitable complexity of the psychomotor organization of any human being: carnal greed, hatred as a secretion of impotence, the fury of unhappiness, tumors as violent conceptions. The monstrous children who grow up deformed, with a malevolent gaze and obscene vocabulary. Those whom good manners, which are also cancers of clean sheets, try to hide in the attics of old houses, in hospitals abandoned by official neglect, or thrown into rivers that are often complicit with humanity because they are often very similar (indifference, arrogance, corruption).
I typed on the typewriter I found tucked away in a room that might have served as Graciela's father's office. It's a narrow room compared to the rest of the house, and the simplicity of the place showed that Graciela's hoarding obsession hadn't extended to this room. A bookcase held law books, their

edges covered in dust, and loose, haphazardly arranged sheets of paper, as if they'd been consulted just the day before. But the dust and mold betrayed the passage of time, as did the spiders that scurried away at my curiosity and intrusion. With the door closed so as not to disturb Graciela, I wrote the articles about insecurity, using my own theories and many others gleaned from the bibliography crudely memorized in my head. Many times I thought I was exaggerating with conspiracy theories that would make the reality fanatics laugh, and so I limited myself to describing the facts. But few see the richness of the facts: the law usually judges them by themselves with the coldness they call objectivity, and that coldness is not a correct name either, because every object can be broken down into thousands of parts, and each one will have something different from the whole.

The three men in my story are isolated beings in a multipliedly complex world. The cerebral concept of perversion implies the existence of a prior, or simply parallel and opposing, idea that serves as a point of comparison. Evil requires good, and vice versa, for their mutual existence. They never appear pure; they are too weak. They are nourished by flesh and ideas, those two noble elements of men. Chemistry both attracts and terrifies me. I am amazed and fearful of the products that arise from the combination of two different elements, yielding something even more different. It is the seemingly uncontrollable nature of the result that I fear.

A son, for example.

I think of Bernardo, who calls me every night from home or the hospital, asking how I am and how Graciela is. He asks if Ricardo has arrived home from work yet. I hand him the phone without speaking, and I hear his voice, sometimes quiet, sometimes angry. Men don't talk much, yet they understand each other even when they argue. Women talk a lot and end up resentful. Female solidarity doesn't exist; that's why we've lost. The feminism of books, demonstrations, and social demands is just a shouting match from a bad Latin American novel.

6

It was very hot at the end of December. It was a Saturday, I remember because Bernardo had arrived home from the hospital shortly after noon, with a bag of charcoal and another with two kilos of beef he'd bought on the way to grill that night. The weather was perfect for spending the whole day in the yard, inhaling the fragrance of the plants, which, rustic and unkempt, grew freely. He found me sitting in the yard with the cat that roamed the neighborhood, seemingly belonging to no one. It would sit on my lap, and when Bernardo saw a scratch on my thigh, he was there because the cat used to greet me with a kiss on the lips and a hand lifting my skirt rather indiscreetly.

" Be careful," he told me.

I nodded, because I liked that he took care of me. I knew about my father and the diabetes. Later he would take even better care of me, to the point of despair and what we call helplessness, products of frustrated dreams. We are not satisfied with the moment when warmth and love converge; they are not enough for us because we can't preserve either of them, as Bernardo would like to and often does with the anatomical specimens in the hospital, in a refrigerator or a jar of formaldehyde.

That night he watched over the fire, whose embers illuminated our faces right there, both of us sitting in the garden chairs, looking at the stars in the summer sky, with a wine that some patient sometimes gave him.

- What do you know about Graciela? How is the situation going?

-There's nothing new. She refused to be examined, so the complaint came to nothing.

-But lawyers find ways…

-She doesn't want to... Besides, who would they ask for financial compensation from, the municipality? Sometimes your naiveté amazes me, Bernie.

"You'll call me a fatalist. Ibáñez told me many times to go to therapy. We doctors have two parallel worlds between which we try to build bridges that always collapse: the reality of the living body and the reality of the anatomical body."

"Reality is not a Testut diagram," I told him.
He got up to turn the meat on the grill and stir the coals.
We heard someone knocking on the door. The neighbor's dogs barked. I'll get it, I said. It seemed strange to me that someone would visit us at eleven o'clock on a Saturday night in a neighborhood where we were new and still viewed with disdainful respect: a doctor and a journalist (who fancied herself a writer).
I walked across the courtyard to the front door. I looked through the peephole and saw the shadow of a man.
- Who is it?
The head moved closer to the peephole as if it wanted to see me through it too, and it was a shadow that covered the little bit of the street. I heard the voice, and I opened it. Ricardo practically collapsed on top of me, crying. I didn't manage to close the door because I had to hold him up so we wouldn't fall, and I called out to Bernardo. Between the two of us, we sat him down in the rocking chair in the patio. He didn't want to let go. He hugged me and moaned with his head resting on my shoulder.
"What's wrong? Calm down a little." My tone was impatient, I know. I was tired of carrying on the tragedies of those two who wouldn't let anyone help them.
Bernardo brought his briefcase and injected something into Ricardo's arm, lifting the sleeve of his sweaty t-shirt. Ricardo startled slightly at the prick, let go of me, and looked at Bernardo's face. His face was distorted by anguish, stained with dried tears upon which new furrows of fresh ones had formed. His hair was longer than before, disheveled, his beard grown long and smelled musty, carrying the scent of blood.
Then he hugged Bernardo and began to say:
- You have to save her, you know ? Promise me you'll save her.
I looked at Bernardo and no longer doubted that a tragedy was unfolding, but it remained to be seen which one. I stood before them and looked around. For a moment, I felt as if I were in an amphitheater during a Greek summer, watching a play by Sophocles: the shouts and gestures, the weeping and the irremediable nature of human actions. I saw them embrace and understood that Bernardo understood it better than I did, and that the other found solace

in the arms I hadn't been able to extend, and on a shoulder as strong as his own. The symbiosis of equality is sometimes the necessary balance. The complementarity of opposites has been overestimated.
The barbecue ended up burning, I suppose, and Saturday night turned into a vigil whose urgency gradually transformed into a slow, unbearable, and hostile wait for morning. We helped him inside, just in case the neighbors were eavesdropping over the dividing wall. We laid him down on the sofa, and I went to the kitchen to make him something hot. Bernardo came in a couple of times.
- How are you doing?
-He's calmer now, but I don't want to sedate him completely; I don't know what he might have taken before. What are you doing?
-You see...
whiskey out of a low kitchen cabinet .
"You're going to kill him," I said, half-smiling.
- Do you think so? After what he told me?
I left the kettle on the stove, but when I went into the living room to talk to Ricardo, he stopped me. The same squeeze on my wrist was now being done by another man.
Wait , Ceci. I'll tell you, better yet .
I was already crying because I knew the answer. Not the how or the form, but the result of that arithmetic operation into which Greek tragedy had been transformed: the sum of the dead was equal to the product of the subtraction. Complementarity, so obstinate in demonstrating the superiority of opposites, had conquered the night.
-She killed herself, Ceci. She threw herself under the train, at that level crossing, the one we saw...
I couldn't help but burst into tears like a fool, and I loathed my condition as a woman filled with absurd sentimentality, with self-imposed impossibilities, with abstract reminiscences anchored in rituals that were ingrained in me as if I were a goddess condemned to always be that: the eternally destructive, the eternal that cannot die. And there were Bernardo's words, building the final scene of the tragedy: the man of science who was ultimately the best writer for this work that was pieced together little by little, day by day, month

after month, throughout the end of a winter, a spring, and the beginning of a summer. Words that were bridges destroyed before anyone could cross them, that were great cranes trying to embrace the bodies that floated down the river, and I felt on my back the cold of the metal intensified by the cold of the water.

I tried to push him away, shoving him, hitting his chest with laughable attempts like a plastic doll. But he wouldn't let go because he loved me, because he was trying to melt into his body all the anger I felt, the bitterness that had seeped into my conscience, which so vainly boasted of its precision, will, and reason.

We heard a bang in the living room , and Bernardo turned his head toward the kitchen door and then back to me. Poor thing, I thought, poor doctor, burdened with the care of two clumsy souls in their desperate and futile attempt to understand reality.

Ricardo had tried to get up, but he fell to the floor because of the sedative. He wasn't hurt, so we sat him down. His shirt was completely soaked. Bernardo took it off, and I went to get a towel to dry him. I rubbed his back and shoulders. He looked at me and said, "That's how Grace did it."

-Okay, Ricky, okay...

- Do you know what happened to him?

I nodded without saying anything.

- Did Bernardo tell you how he died?

I put down the towel and sat down next to him. With one arm over his shoulders, I tried to rock him like a boy.

-No, dear. It doesn't matter now.

-Yes, it matters, Ceci. You don't die just any old way, she...she chose that way...and I want to understand.

- So what's there to understand? It was his decision, and nothing more.

- And what about us?

-We're still here.

- As if nothing happened?

-As if nothing happened, no, but what can we do?

He looked at Bernardo and accepted the glass of whiskey . He took a sip and Bernie slowly took it from his hand.

I was talking to him, not to me.
Last night we made love after so long, you know ? It was beautiful to feel her body after all the fighting and misery. I thought we were starting over. She got up early and went to her studio in the garage. She'd never stopped painting, but I didn't want to see the paintings because the few I'd seen started were always about the Dark Ones and all those sad images I didn't understand. There was no way to pull her away from those ideas, and I told myself that if she at least transformed them into art, she'd get rid of them that way. But I'm not an artist, and I didn't understand that all of that is just psychological theory. I realized that her art fueled the obsession, but not that she also seemed to be creating a world that was being built within reality.
He stopped, asked for another sip of whiskey . Bernardo gave it to him, murmured a quiet word of agreement, of complicity, and took it back from his hands.
I often wondered if what she told me about those beings from another world didn't actually come from her own. But that wasn't the point. The men who attacked her exist somewhere in this neighborhood. I've seen them, and they're just like the ones in the paintings.
"The same?" I asked.
He ignored me, he kept talking to Bernardo.
“This morning I got up and started preparing mate for both of us. I usually left the kettle and the mate gourd on a tray on a small table next to the stool where she sat to paint, and then I went to work. When I got there, she wasn't there; she'd gone to the bathroom upstairs. I started looking at the paintings, against my usual habit. I think I was feeling too good about our reconciliation, so everything was new to me, in a way. The paintings were stacked on their sides on the floor and leaned against the wall. I saw, as I expected, all those more developed figures in various positions and settings. Some in what looked like a neighborhood shop, a kind of butcher shop, it seemed to me. Others in an office in some downtown building in Buenos Aires, facing a plaza. Others in an ordinary house, in a neighborhood with diagonal streets. It was like looking at a comic strip, and the story unfolded as I turned the pages. The lives of those men, solitary, but with commonalities. Like you and me, I think,” he said to Bernardo. -We have nothing in common, but at some point we

coincide. We are united by anger, perhaps, or by tragedy and despair, which is the most faithful of wives.

Bernardo handed him the glass again, but he drank first. They didn't look at me; I didn't exist.

-I left without saying hello to her. Do you realize that?

She covered her face.

"I realize that," Bernardo replied.

It was one or two in the morning. The neighborhood was completely silent. The light from the bedside lamp on the table next to the sofa was like a firefly in a desolate field. Old furniture and chairs acquired from a pawn shop served as the backdrop for abandoned buildings in this city we were in: the night constructed around the depiction of a tragedy.

Later that afternoon, I found out. And when they told me, it was like seeing her right now, because what the policeman was telling me in words riddled with technical jargon that poorly masked the poverty and lack of education, I compensated for with Graciela's beauty, imagining her body walking down the street, wearing the jeans she used for painting, stained with various colors, and the old blouse she'd covered with her jacket—that one, remember ? —that she wore the day we went out to eat. She walked the streets, lost in thought, not seeing anything, because it wasn't her custom to go out on Saturday mornings. I saw her step up and down the sidewalks, cross the streets, step on the broken tiles, and dodge the puddles in the gutters. She stood, perhaps, for a while on a corner, as if waiting for the bus. But she was looking beyond, toward the station. However, she wouldn't go in to get onto the platform; she'd walk a block or two past it, until she reached the level crossing barriers. It must have been around nine in the morning, but there was already a lot of activity: people working Saturdays and those going out to shop or stroll downtown, the only weekend outing they could afford. I imagine her standing in front of the metal railings that zigzag across the path where pedestrians cross the tracks. The red and white lights signaling the danger, and her hesitating to enter, as if it were a long labyrinth from which she feared she wouldn't find her way out.

He coughed. Bernardo gave him a paper napkin, and we saw him spit out snot and tears. He sneezed, and Bernardo took care of throwing away the soiled

paper. He brought the bottle of whiskey and placed it on the small table next to the sofa. Sitting opposite Ricardo in a chair, he affectionately patted his face.

Ricardo made a face that resembled a smile, but he was still embarrassed. But it wasn't so difficult for her. She navigated the labyrinth and arrived at the tracks. She looked this way and that, the parallel rails meeting at the end and beginning of the route, passing through several towns. The world, however, converged there, where she stood, at the intersection of the tracks and an ordinary street, where the barriers had been broken for years, rising and falling with the irregular rhythm of proper or improper functioning. But it didn't matter; she was alone, with her legs to cross quickly, watching the train approaching the station, slower and slower, but still two blocks away before it stopped. Graciela closed her eyes, surely to more intensely savor the smell of the hot steel that so attracted her to the tracks, to hear the train's whistle announcing its arrival, shrill, alarmist, as imponderable as a tempest. He would also feel the rumble of steel and earth beneath his feet, growing louder as the onslaught of the hundreds of iron beasts drew closer, leaving him no option but to keep going, for that was what they had been created for. Then the wind around him, the whirlwind the machine created around him. He stopped, swallowed hard to loosen the knot in his throat.

-And he jumped right before, a second before, or at the same instant, or ten seconds before?, or a minute before? It didn't matter, and how can you know, you mean ? How can you know unless you do it yourself? And it wouldn't do anyone any good to know, because there's no better or worse way to die than the one that's effective.

It was three in the morning.

- Go to sleep, Ceci. I'll stay and watch him for a while, at least until he falls asleep.

He kissed me, hugged me for a long time while I cried. He took me to bed and tucked me in. Then he went back to the living room and I heard a chair being moved, a couple of whispers, and the light going out.

I succumbed to a half-sleep filled with ridiculous dreams mixed with others that simulated reality with more cruelty than compassion. That's how dreams are, and that's why we don't understand them. We settle for their

strangeness, and think that in this way they fulfill their purpose. We wake up more at ease to see that reality is more sane, and as we get out of bed we see through the window the panorama of a war that is beginning.

In the morning, Mateo Ibáñez came to pick us up in his car. The men showered and chatted over breakfast. I dressed slowly, and every now and then Bernardo came in to check on me. He brought me a cup of coffee with milk and some pastries that Mateo had brought. It would have been a splendid Sunday morning, sunny and with friends, having breakfast at the patio table, but we had an appointment with a funeral.
We went to Quilmes in Ibáñez's Falcon. Ricardo and I were in the back, Bernardo in the front. Ricardo had fallen asleep again; I closed my eyes, listening to the conversation between them in the front seat. Bernardo must have turned around to see us; he knew how sensitive a woman's ears could be.
- Did you speak with the people from the municipality?
- With those useless people? Yes, but all they did was pick up what was left and put it in a bag.
-Thank you for speeding everything up, Mateo. The sooner this is over, the better.
It was a somber wake, with only the bare necessities covered by the teachers' insurance and social security contributions. The coffin, of course, was closed, and there were a few flowers. A few neighbors attended, most out of curiosity; their expressions betrayed their feelings about her. No children, no parents representing the students.
It was a five-hour wake during Sunday afternoon, already heavy with sadness or drowsiness, a kind of decrepitude into which the week sinks without knowing if it will ever end. Then, after a long while of sitting or pacing, yawning or trying to keep Ricardo seated (Bernardo had given him another sedative that morning and again upon arriving at the wake), I heard the train's horn as it pulled into the station. The dog came in immediately. It was large, with thick fur, and a man followed. The afternoon light streamed in like a torrent of white light into the dimness of the room. I could barely make out his silhouette against the light. I thought of the painting; it was unavoidable.

Now any sketch of a man, even a caricature from the newspaper, reminded me of him.
The door closed, and as my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I saw the man who had entered, followed by the dog. He approached the coffin, the dog sniffed the floor, and then sat down, looking at his owner. The man was thin, with a dark beard, a face as white as milk, and dark hair. His eyes, which I could barely see from where I stood, were small. He wore corduroy trousers and a wool cardigan . I jumped up, and Bernardo followed me, asking what was happening.
"That man," I told him. "He's one of them."
- One of whom?
-Of those... I don't know! But he looks like the one who escaped from La Plata, I already told you.
I approached.
-Good afternoon, sir. Did you know Graciela?
She looked at me with sad eyes.
-If dogs aren't allowed, I'm sorry, but if I let him outside he starts howling.
-I didn't say that, I asked him if he knew Graciela.
"I didn't know her, but she was my wife's cousin. Laura couldn't come, and she asked me to pay her respects."
I had no idea about Graciela's relatives.
-I apologize for being so abrupt...it's just that...
-I understand... What was your relationship with her?
-A friend, actually a high school classmate, nothing more.
I turned around and went back to sit next to Bernardo. Shame and boredom filled my lungs and throbbed in my head like two lacerating monsters.
-Let's go home, please, I don't feel well.
I left after Mateo and Bernardo helped Ricardo walk. I saw the man looking at us sideways, and only then did I realize I hadn't asked his name. I went back, determined in my stubbornness.
-Excuse me for bothering you, but you didn't tell me your name.
"Thomas," he said.
I wasn't surprised; I think I even felt calmer. I stroked the dog's head.
- What's it called?

-Dog. I can't give him another name after the other one died.
"I understand," I said. I said goodbye and left.
The funeral was on Monday at noon. But we spent the rest of Sunday in silence, me in bed, Bernardo wandering around the house, looking at the antiques and glancing at Ricardo, who was living peacefully in the limbo of sleeping pills. I didn't cry, I didn't suffer, until Graciela's body disappeared underground, and only then would her memory return, never to leave me.
I lay down in Graciela's room, on the same bed. I looked out the balcony window, at the white walls and the painting of the Dark Ones, the background of the painting immersed in countless shades of gray, the street of an ordinary neighborhood empty after its inhabitants had abandoned it. I remembered the paintings I had done in those months. What would happen to the house and all the things inside? Perhaps my cousin had sent her husband to the wake to gain a foothold in the territory she was interested in. I didn't know if Graciela's paintings would be worth anything.
I went downstairs, determined to distract myself from my gloom with some activity, and asked Bernardo what he thought. I saw him contemplating a painting in the living room: the Obscure ones here were an aberration of uncertain style, something like German Expressionism, with ochre and gold tones, which is why it was in the main room of the house.
-I think they're good paintings. He had talent, but he hid it.
-We should ask an art dealer for their opinion. I think my boss knows one.
We went together to Graciela's workshop. We opened the door and found the place illuminated as if the light had persisted, locked inside, even as Sunday afternoon was drawing to a close.
We looked at each other, thinking the same thing. We saw the paintings hanging on the walls, the palette I'd left uncleaned the day before, the paint I was working on. There were dozens of paintings leaning against the walls, one on top of the other. Bernardo started moving and looking at the ones on one side, I the ones on the other. I found what Ricardo had told us about, the many scenes of the Dark Ones in their different lives. I couldn't look at them without feeling. I skimmed them quickly, but I kept going to kill time, perhaps, or out of fear of being unfaithful to Graciela. That afternoon I had

discovered that I didn't really know her, something I'd known for a long time, and I had let myself be carried away by the trust of those few months.
And suddenly I had to stop.
I saw that painting and began to fear that my hands and arms would betray me when I went to pick it up and move it away from the others. That's what I was doing, and Bernardo heard my ragged breathing; when he saw me, he came over to help.
When we leaned him against the wall, he understood what was happening to me.
The fabric was large, perhaps the same size as the one in his room.
It was the same street, the same shades of gray, the same uncertain lighting. There they were again, the three figures of the Dark Ones, this time with their backs to him, clearly walking toward the end of the street that faded into the distance. But there was a fourth figure, a darker shade, almost black like the overcoat he had once seen in the wardrobe, and his long hair was lighter.
She was a woman, and she was going with them.

Immediately, Cesare Lombroso's theory sprang to mind—that kind of modern Frankenstein, who in turn was a modern Prometheus in Mary Shelley's lucid imagination. Wife of a poet, her poetry wandered through darker corridors than her husband's, surely, because there are men who enter labyrinths to deliberately lose themselves, never to escape the established order no matter how much they circle it; the familiar is safer than uncertainty.

Lombroso, then, broke the mold of scientific theories, and so great was his imagination that the society of the time initially stared at him in awe, astonished by a theory too alluring to be rejected, but also too grounded in fanciful dreams. Some have said that Lombroso was a great precursor of science fiction, but his imagination was thwarted not by the society in which he lived, but by his own stubbornly religious upbringing. Italian after all, tradition was too deeply ingrained in his spirit and mind for him to fight to the death for a theory only seemingly confirmed by a few corpses stolen from the city morgue or unearthed from the cemetery next to the chapel.

Only the bodies of suicides could be exhumed without prior ecclesiastical authorization, because they were buried outside consecrated ground. But he knew that even near the church walls there were those who shot themselves in the temple, or cut their wrists until they bled to death slowly, or were found hanging from one of the grilles protecting the stained-glass windows. His theory was both too gruesome and too simplistic: he explained everything through the shape of bodies. Deformities were seen as the expression of a pathology and the explanation for behavior. He gained followers, especially among doctors who cling to the viscera as if they were reading architecture books: the folds, the fissures, the protuberances, the pedicles, the cysts, the lobes. In short, the physical, the positive.

And although many rejected this theory, and many others refuted its supposed truth with countless contrary examples—as many as Lombroso and all his disciples could dissect over years and years—the foundation of positivism, no longer so much anatomical but behavioral, created and

cultivated adherents among other sciences. Psychology, for example, with Comte as one of its principal figures, modified it, of course, elevating it to more scientific, even metaphysical, criteria—a contradiction inherent in every law within its hollow origin—to the point of expanding for more than half a century throughout Europe and crossing the oceans to this America, which was characterized from the outset by the incompatibility of its natures: the impossible struggle between the spirit that the Spanish imposed with the sharp tongue of their swords, and the nature that was the root and foundation of the native civilizations.

The Jesuits, with their astonishingly practical judgment and characteristic intelligence, attempted to make small worlds function—worlds they knew to be a chimera, perhaps as they knew to be the chimera of God—and to unite both worlds. They imposed teachings, taught sciences, and managed to create bilingual monsters, like Dr. Frankenstein's creature: mere monstrosities that responded to certain external stimuli, creatures constructed from a single piece of the body, but with multiple fragments of psychology: science, mysticism, obedience and order, heaven in the cloister and hell in the jungle, God and angels hovering over the Missions. And beyond the rivers: the cities of America that were killing each other until they could no longer support the platform of those mansions. And the outside world came looking for them, and kicked them out after taking the Indians to exterminate them in its own way. And the chimerical dreamers of the new amalgam: the synthesis of El Dorado with the apostolic mission of the Holy Church became mud in which all those who came after slipped, because that is the virtue of water on earth, it hardly creates and almost always drowns the seeds.

In America, many years later, other Argentine dreams—yes, silver ones, obviously, because golden ones never existed—formed the chimera of a country so vast and progressive that it convinced too many intelligent men, or at least they pretended to be convinced. The breadbasket of the world, we called ourselves. The historic presidencies of the late 19th century, and also the wars we tried to imitate by parodying those of the North, whom we so envied, even attempting to mimic their ways of dying. If they had fought against slavery in their own territory, we couldn't be any less fierce in the fight against slavery beyond our own. If we didn't have enough weapons,

there were our neighbors, and if we didn't have enough men, there were our neighbors for that too, who never want to be outdone by others.
Positivism, therefore, has always been a resource for reluctantly, but also, and above all, desperately, explaining what we don't understand: the affinity for war, which is the same as saying the affinity for death. Because killing the other is exactly the same as killing oneself, the game of the inverted mirror. Lombroso sought to find the explanation for mental illness in his dissections. He found it in variety and exceptions, because every brain is different. The form and measure of behavior were then established, even with hypotheses worthy of the highest imaginative intelligence: that of God, for example, who is the only one we allow to abuse such a capacity, because He knows how to use it. We humans, on the other hand, create imperfect toys that break easily. But God's toy has lasted a long time, so long that it has resisted dying by killing others: number, ugliness, and secrecy are the triad depicted on the shields. Against the excessive number that threatens us. Against the ugliness that offends the eye. Against the impregnable silence of those who think. Comte would have taken the opposite path had he been allowed, but his fascination led him astray. It wasn't that he rejected the seed of the idea, but rather that his intention to reconstruct it with conceptual elements, not with the matter of the body—both perishable in the graveyard—became lost in the corridors of his mental laboratory. Or perhaps it was his disciples, as is so often the case, who guided their master's steps down a path he didn't want to follow. "More Catholic than the Pope" is the obligatory, simple, and trivial phrase. Unworthy of being repeated, but there it is. It was uttered, and we settle comfortably into this explanation, just as Comte did with Lombroso's. He created, then, an architecture that sought to imitate Kant's Pure Reason, but he found it impossible to maintain. Kant had constructed his with concepts, and it remained beautiful, old, it's true, but beautiful in the inviolability of its execution and its transcendence. Comte's, on the other hand, soon rotted away in the graveyards of the universities.
But Ingenieros rescued it in this southern subcontinent, in this Río de la Plata region teeming with humidity and mosquitoes, where extreme cold goes hand in hand with the tropical heat that constantly tries to beckon southward, urging it to behave: winds, scorching rains, plagues, heat, and humidity. But

the sea has always tried to fight off these vermin, disguising itself as a river that is nothing more than a two-faced traitor, because it doesn't know what it wants to be: sea or river, or simply an immense bed of land that was submerged millions of years ago.
The venerable rector of the University of La Plata took positivism to heart and adapted it, and let's just say he honored his intelligence and his commendable educational intentions by creating the blend he poured into the classrooms before students who were astonished by his words. How well he spoke, my God, but above all, how well he wrote. And that's how sociology was enriched with theories borrowed from here and there, and disciples were trained who were more disastrous than the founders. They spoke and wrote about what was happening to us as a country, and it was true; about our racial heritage and the psychological consequences for us as a society, and all of that was true. Ayarragaray was another who created theories that were as novel as the readers and students were ignorant of French, because not everyone could, like the Canés or the Rivarolas, undergo their baptism of fire for a year or more in Paris.
The literary richness was greater than the scientific, that's the truth, I think. And even that richness was an imitation that had to be shaken off and washed for years and years in various sources to change its tone.
But the ideas remain.
All this lengthy introduction serves to introduce us to the suicidal person. Not suicide as an act, but the nature of the suicidal person. Is there something in their face that foreshadows their intention? Is their behavior different even in the briefest and most trivial gesture they ever make? If we could explore the convolutions of their brain, would we see the labyrinthine conundrums that old theories allow us to imagine?

He was one of Ingenieros' look-alikes, perhaps the most adaptable of them all, the one who understood his friend's incredible talent and also the contradictory limitations imposed by his enormous knowledge, his encyclopedic nature, we might say. Aníbal Ponce, in one of his lectures on psychology, speaking about anguish, quotes an Italian author who defines this feeling as an *incertezza Unsurpassable* . When I read that, a door opened,

granting me access to a whole series of concepts arranged on countless shelves in an immense apartment illuminated by a curtainless window overlooking a city that was invisible from the entrance, because there were no other buildings as tall as the one I was in. Only the clear sky and the cold sun of an autumn morning. Perhaps the great river was far away and yet so close, as William Hudson once said, reminiscing about his life on the pampas. Beneath the window, there would be a pretentious river that wanted to be the sea, or a vast, boundless plain that tried to plant the symbolism of the sea in the minds of its inhabitants. The land is subtle, sometimes using psychological methods, sublimations, perhaps; but the sea is absolute and too honest, so much so that it cannot lie: water is unstable, it is deep, and it doesn't always suit our bodies. But our body belongs to him, that's why he always waits, and when he gets angry, he comes looking for us.

The sea beyond which lies the land from which many of our parents and grandparents came. And the echo of the words that define anguish resonated in the labyrinth of my brain with the resounding certainty of the Italian language. That's right, for me: its sound is resounding and definitive. It leaves no other way to define things. It grudgingly accepts other forms, especially the delicacy of French, whether it be poetry or science; it is a cloud of dust and perfume that envelops concepts and names them like water that defines the shape of the vessel in which it is contained. Let's not speak of English, of course, which is of a practicality bordering on the obscenity of ignorance: English presupposes the mordacity and avarice hidden in the bones of a prostitute who longs to meet that man, the Ripper, who will make her feel what she will never feel again: for one extreme night, the price of her life. The Italian, then, defines anguish, or at least poetically and scientifically encloses it in two words: *incertezza insurmountable* . And that uncertainty is perhaps the cause of the suicidal person's anguish.

Like a kindergarten Lombroso, I would search beneath the skulls of the terminally ill patients in the hospital where Bernardo works for signs of that anguish, which, like a cancer, would undoubtedly be growing in the irredeemable, the condemned. In those men and women who watch us from their beds as we walk down the hospital corridor and glimpse the inside of the room. Or in those faces that stare back at us, their bodies leaning against the

walls, covered in a threadbare gown or barely a surgical dress. The overgrown, unkempt beards, the dark circles under their eyes like unwanted permanent guests, the thin arms, the frail legs, the feet covered by the geography of veins. And the eyes, by God, that speak an Italian that only anguish could translate into the hermetic execution of the German: a gas chamber that chokes the throat and sets it ablaze.

Men who drown, that's what suicide is. Uncertainty is everything: the only malleable concept that accepts all forms of infinite possibility. Some might say that the limits of imagination determine those speculations that generate despair regarding both the possible and the impossible, because the impossible is sometimes the true cause of fear: hoping for it is the highest expectation, and that's why we can't renounce it. To do so would mean surrendering. There are those who resign themselves, but fall into sadness, what we might call bitterness, depression, and then suicide. Therefore, by different paths, they all end up in the same sea.

Has anyone ever seen the sea from a winter beach, the sky gray, overcast with clouds, their grays flecked here and there with dark, ominous-shaped storm clouds, a harbinger of disaster? The waves choppy, but not yet too much, their crests laced with foam, poised to break and scatter monsters across the beach: skeletons in the water, strewn with debris.

Our remains define us. Our bodies are remnants of what they once were. We lost millions of cells that have died, and each one was a friend who knew us better than we knew ourselves.

We are not our own friends. We hate ourselves, we loathe ourselves, and when we look in the mirror, the struggle of light is exhausted in the darkness of the atrocious: the flesh endures as long as the cross.

But isn't the cross eternal, the symbol of death transformed into resurrection? The cross is on the tombs in cemeteries and at the entrances of churches: vestibules.

However, death is part of life. Lombroso may have seen it without understanding it, or at least without being able to explain it without being considered insane, when many already considered him to be so.

My future is foretold in the palm of my hand, according to palm readers. And how does that differ from what he believed? Only in that the anatomical is

what can be seen with the traditional senses, and the palmistry is what is seen with other senses that tend to be undervalued because we are afraid of them.

The suicidal person then decides how their life will end. That is, of course, part of the reason for their decision. Some contemplate it for a long time, announcing it surreptitiously, playing the mysterious card to intrigue those they wish to provoke resentment and remorse in. Others say nothing and appear more optimistic than usual. Both are signs, but the rest of us don't want to see them. Upon sensing them, or simply recognizing them, we look away, change the subject, or walk away. We don't want to get our hands dirty, we don't want to be implicated or suspected, we don't want to pick up the pieces, and even less do we want to be blamed for what we failed to prevent. We don't realize, however, that we are permeated by the secretion of the cobwebs with which they envelop us. There is no way to avoid what they will likely do, just as there is no way to escape the consequences.
The choice of method defines the motive. The cause of the act is not singular; it is usually only one determining factor: insurmountable frustration, the death of someone, the perception of an unbearable future. The motive for the act is, in reality, our own temperament. I know it is not a scientifically accepted term, and that it only explains a few of the qualities that can be seen in behavior. The word *temperament* suggests to me, through heteronymous association, *temperature,* both signifying a certain measure of something, whether personality traits or atmospheric conditions. In turn, the words *cold* or *heat inevitably arise* , which in themselves reveal certain states that provoke or stimulate thoughts of suicide or survival. I also cannot help but think of the word *tempera,* which is simply paint made with a mixture of different pigments of varying textures, more or less thick, but always flexible. Therefore, the measure of all these elements that we mix in our psyche is what conditions, at any given moment, the decision we make. The dose of a medication, for example, is nothing more than the quantity and quality of the chemicals that our body uses daily in its metabolism, unknown and immeasurable.

The amount of each pigment, for example, will determine the shades of the paint.
Graciela, whom I've mentioned elsewhere, knew this, or at least sensed it. She painted not what she saw, but what lay beyond all that could be technically verified. The measure of the cosmos is nothing more than the measure that humankind is capable of conceiving: the anthill is the universe for the ant. (Or who knows, perhaps an ant's brain could support the weight of the human brain, nestled in the Atlas Mountains.)
But the manner of dying is, perhaps, the most childish and at the same time the most difficult. Those who choose slow and painless methods are perhaps those who fear suffering, and yet there is Madame Bovary, who, undoubtedly due to haste and the ignorance that her husband could not combat because he could not eliminate it from himself, drank arsenic and died writhing in spasms that tortured her more, perhaps, than the very future she feared. There are those who cut their wrists, and they're so inept that they only manage to injure themselves with permanent scars that will always remind them of that attempt, annoying, incidentally, the doctors and surgeons. Bernardo would have much to add to all this, but I'll ask for his opinion later, which I doubt will be compassionate or patient.
Those who don't want the pain of death, I think, aren't entirely convinced about ending their lives. If they fear pain, they fear life, but they don't hate it: it's inherent in their choice. They love life so much that they want it simple, temperate, and peaceful, like a summer afternoon at the beach. Dying, therefore, is for them just another form of the life they desire. Putting their head in the oven and turning on the gas might be a feasible option for them; there's no blood, and the possibility of sleep or reverie is always present. An explosion? It's always possible if someone turns on the light when they arrive, and the suicide victim's body will have to be laid out in a closed casket. There are so many examples that I won't elaborate, lest I be accused of an apology, which I am far from attempting. Free expression has always been a source of pettiness and censorship.

But let's talk about violent methods. That's what I call those aimed at causing death instantly, with no turning back. They may cause pain, but it's usually

brief if the act has been carried out properly. It's the method generally chosen by the most determined, but that doesn't mean they have an advantage over the temperament of others. The fact that the pain is brief means they're willing to accept it as long as it doesn't last long, but above all, it's the procedure chosen by those who don't want to have time to back down. Slow deaths leave too much time for regret, when there's no turning back, perhaps, and the absence of physical pain is counterbalanced by the pain of the repentant spirit, and there's no greater pain than the long and lasting anguish of the conscience.

Time, contrary to what we think, is always plentiful, especially when we want it to pass quickly. Even those who choose a quick death are subject to a timeframe that involves and requires preparation for the act. Someone who intends to shoot themselves in the temple must find the weapon, or go buy one if they don't already own one, which is very easy these days for ordinary people, who are the ones who usually commit suicide. (Those who own firearms for everyday use don't need to kill themselves, but rather protect themselves.) Then, they load the magazine with a bullet if they want to play Russian roulette with themselves, but this kind of masochism is rarely the case for those who are completely decisive. It's to be expected, then, that they will load the magazine with several bullets. If they are inexperienced, they will first test it against the ground, and the sound of the muzzle flash might make them give up. The others, however, will not hesitate. They will place the barrel inside their mouths, or rest it against their right temple if they are right-handed, and with or without their eyes closed, they will surrender themselves to God, for that will be their last thought. The God of the fussy and the nonconformist will receive them near his throne, but not too close. There is a line for them: the line of those who arrive with their heads split open, displaying, as in an anatomy museum, the sinuous deformities of their brains.

Then there are those who choose the gallows. It's a very popular method, perhaps influenced by film, and while macabre, it's effective, and there's a certain romantic element to imagining the faces of those who will discover us hanging from a beam. For that, too, there's preparation time. Choosing the right rope, long since replaced by cables and even wires. The place from

which we'll hang requires more thought. Not all ceilings have beams, and sometimes the lamp some people decide to hang themselves from breaks under their weight, and then everything is ruined. The best thing is to find a hook, one of those used to hang bicycles, which are very fashionable these days of exercise and good health. Of course, it must be high enough so that our feet don't touch the ground. Then, the chair on which we'll stand temporarily while we arrange the rope around our neck. Not everyone knows how to tie a slipknot, and they'll have to practice. And during that time, they might have second thoughts, or perhaps the act of studying the steps of tying the knot will simply serve as a distraction from unwanted thoughts. And finally, the last step, which will literally be the last step of our lives. Pushing the chair and awaiting the descent into the hell of emptiness. There, where there is nothing but wind, sometimes icy, sometimes hot as a summer fire, rocking the millions of bodies that have accumulated throughout history. And sometimes the bodies creak on the worn ropes or the posts from which they hang, like the empty swings in a park where there are no children, because the children have grown up or died, and weeds grow around the rusty swings that the winter wind, nevertheless, never forgets to push.

Then there are those who don't dare use their own hands, and use others instead. Let's not blame them too much; in those situations, we are very vulnerable, and the desired end is the only certainty, but the means are incongruous with our way of thinking, and especially our way of feeling. We abhor pain, but we love life; that incongruity is the fatalism that defines us. So we look to the outside world to destroy us. I repeat, it has always been the easiest method, and speed has exacerbated those possibilities. I'm referring to motor vehicles, of course. Who hasn't thought, said, or threatened, even jokingly, during an argument with a partner or as teenagers with our parents, to go out into the street and throw themselves under a car? We don't think, of course, about the poor driver of the vehicle that damaged the asphalt, or perhaps simply sent us to the hospital. But that problem can be avoided if we resort to trains. The train driver is too far away, up there, meters above the ground, and he's used to all sorts of things crossing his path: cars, buses, trucks, bicycles, motorcycles, dogs, men, women, and even baby strollers. They can't stop the long train of cars, obviously, and that's the commendable

excuse that absolves them of all blame. They, the drivers of winter on the tracks, are the temporary gods that men invented when the machine was invented. At that moment in world history, humanity definitively differentiated itself from the rest of the animal kingdom. It wasn't the spoken word, it wasn't the creation of the wheel, it wasn't the invention of the printing press. It was machinery that made man, so to speak, God's vice president. Always blamed for incompetence, always exploited by the cross they cannot renounce because there is no other official below them, and if there is, it is a formless mass called a party that tends to disintegrate, to fall apart as soon as one tries to hold on.

However, they too must wait for the train, standing at the edge of the platform, testing the surface like a game of the impatient. Or by the level crossing, waiting for the barriers to come down. Or on a pedestrian bridge over the tracks, gazing at the edge of the world from that fragile urban vantage point: men like ants, and the train at last, symbol of omen, messenger of hell, creation of all the gods ever imagined, is approaching. The sound of the thunderous horn is heard, the rumble in the earth announcing its proximity, faster than the train itself, sound this time faster than sight, at least in these precarious times where ignorance pervades even the aims of death.

Man is childish and distorts what he analyzes, and the object touched becomes something else, and so on, until the archive of the world reveals that history is nothing more than the constant repetition of a failure: the frustrated attempt of a sick dreamer, or of an eternal sick man who dreams of not waking up.

But let's return to the reason for this lengthy discussion: the anatomical, not psychological or physiological, nature of suicide. Is it possible to distinguish it in any way by some physical trait, even under a microscope? And if so, aren't we aware, at this stage of scientific progress, that even these changes are due to the continuous formation and destruction resulting from the body's constant alchemy? Don't changes also occur after the death of matter? Because when the heart stops beating, the blood stops, and there will be no more nourishment for the body. But that's all. The corpse, as such, will

continue to evolve in some way, and we console ourselves by calling it involution. But who could say for sure?

A corpse, as such, continues the physiology of nature, and that is why we cannot separate into disciplines what is nothing more than an indestructible unity that we choose to separate in order to study it better. Our mind, in its ignorance, explores through methods. Our heart judges, in its selfishness, through classifications. Both try to ignore each other, ignoring the universe in which they live.

The corpse of the suicide victim will not show what it was like before the sought-after death; it will simply demonstrate that death is just another part of life.

Because the suicidal person sees both as a god, the origin and end of himself. Therein lies his pride, which is nothing more than the timid consolation that will assist him, holding his hand so that he does not repent, like a nurse or a pious wife, in the final moment.

FREEDOM AND DISPOSSESSION

1

That was my last day in the newsroom. Even though a few more weeks passed before my final departure, the afternoon Beltrame and I talked, argued, fought, and then fell silent, we knew, when we looked at each other, that we wouldn't see each other again, that we didn't want to see each other anymore, but each for different reasons. On the surface, there were the professional differences, whether it was incompatibility of opinions or personalities, like a marriage that ends because the partners realize that the mutual admiration they felt for each other has turned into utter disappointment, and that there's no room left but pity disguised as understanding and coated with the ever-official and well-regarded, yet fragile, patina of tolerance.

First, I must explain how the whole process of my departure from the newspaper, and from journalism in general, began. I say "process" deliberately. Because that word was very fashionable at the time. The so-called National Reorganization Process was all the rage in the headlines of the press, whether print, radio, or television. If nobody wanted to get into trouble, they had to use that label to refer to the de facto government.

It had been many months, perhaps even more than a year, since we all knew Beltrame was selling us out. One month one, the next month another, our colleagues began to disappear. At first, they would be absent for several days at a time, claiming illness. Sometimes they would call themselves, other times their wives, friends, or whoever. Or simply, no one would answer the phone. Beltrame would shout from his office, calling for Braulio, who defended him fiercely when no one else would even look him in the face. But those who resigned left the country, after a series of procedures almost impossible to describe, let alone complete. They would submit their resignations with all the formalities, and without giving anyone time to react, they would leave the office, get in the car, and vanish. That, I think, was a relief for Beltrame, but then came the long weeks when he wrote and wrote, though no one knew exactly what. Every now and then, editorials appeared under the signature of someone called "Mascarita," who, beneath that gentle facade, used sarcasm

to denounce—always indirectly, always with a taste bordering on the elegance of a Harlequin—those men and women some of us knew and others didn't. Mere activists, or collaborators, nothing more. Whatever arrived at the newsroom by whatever means was enough to set Bautista Beltrame's hands to work at his typewriter. It wasn't the writing style we were used to, of course, not the literary flourishes he sometimes used in the stories he published in magazines, nor did those articles contain the vulgarity he liked to use as a sign of strength or misunderstood masculinity. But we all knew he had the talent to metamorphose. No one read what he wrote on those occasions before it was published. If he did it during working hours, he would lock the door and hide the manuscript in the desk, which no one could access unless they smashed it to pieces with an axe. In a drawer that ran the entire length of the desk and was secured with two locks, he kept his most valuable possessions: his writings, which he claimed were irreplaceable, that he could never write them again as they were, that they were imperfect gems, surely—he acknowledged with feigned and unhealthy humility—but that they were his, as was his own heart, so bitter to anyone, even to himself, but which was his heart, despite everything.

I recognized in that metaphor the lines of a poem by Crane, and although he said them in front of several of us, I was the only one who smiled for a moment. He noticed, avoided my gaze, and locked himself in his office. We heard the drawer creak on its hinges, and then the clatter of the keyboard that day stretched well into the night, when everyone had already left and only the proofreader remained for the morning edition. It was Mario Marizza, his protégé, the relative of military officers who was nevertheless the black sheep, the one who went against the grain of conservative opinion. At first glance, we didn't understand; sometimes journalists are simply chroniclers of everyday reality and don't see or consider the causes behind behaviors and outcomes, what happens in the streets: the traffic, the gunshots and arguments, and at night the alarming silence broken only by sirens.

I stood there, lost in thought, peering up from my Remington at what was happening between the two of them in the office. The complicity of a pair of theatrical characters—that's what I seemed to be seeing through the half-open door, like a scene from a comedy show where one actor was the good

guy, the funny one, the fool, sometimes, and the other the serious one, the responsible one, the one who challenged and got angry so often. One with a high-pitched, almost shrill voice in his complaints and excuses, the other with a baritone voice, authoritarian and self-sufficient. And I thought I heard a code in their long, tumultuous conversations: each trying to convince the other, mutually, until each changed their mind for the other's, and they returned to the argument, but from different perspectives.

I don't know what was happening, just as I never really knew what was happening in the country. Not all the people who disappeared were newspaper staff, nor were they all those with opinions clearly opposed to the regime. There were cadets, secretaries, siblings of any member of the staff, a cleaning woman who came in every day to clean Beltrame's office before he arrived, but one day they ran into each other in the hallway, and the next day she was absent.

We, who could read in the silence of his eyes the desire to beat him to a pulp, found ourselves disarmed when he confronted us. Fear emboldened him, always, and his hands, those long, perhaps even beautiful fingers, were weapons he wielded like someone who resorts to daggers hidden in a pocket, or a revolver on their belt, or a packet of poison concealed in their wallet. His fingers tapped on the keys of the old typewriter that had been there since the newspaper's founding in 1925, when men thought differently, when the left was as valuable as the right, and society was a single world seen through different eyes that colored it as they pleased. Machines are slaves to thought, and when they themselves think, I've often said to myself, who will stop them?

Not pity, not that strange symbiosis of love and hate we saw in Beltrame's eyes when he confronted us. With every order he gave, barely peeking out of the door, clinging to it as if either man or door were about to fall, he asked for or ordered something: a blank sheet of paper, last week's newspaper, or simply a coffee, even if it was lukewarm and bitter. In every word, Gloria's name was implicitly on his lips. In the insult and the praise, in the metaphor and the obscenity, in a line of a poem or in the anonymous note posted in a corner of page 34, in the erotic classifieds and the obituaries, in everything he read and judged before each edition—because we must acknowledge, without a doubt, his professionalism, his obsession with the exact word, the adoration

he felt for the printed word to the point of not fully understanding it when he tried to explain his vision to us.
All of that crumbled when we thought about what he was doing, even though we knew he was doing it to survive, and perhaps also to protect us, because we were his daily bread, his work, his life, his daily bread. Whether the others went to heaven or hell was the price of war. That's what the military had said hundreds of times, over and over, on national television, after the familiar metallic, strident march that blared even in the bathrooms of houses in every neighborhood, from the radio some poor guy was listening to while sitting on the toilet, trying to tune in to Sunday's game. The World Cup would come soon, in a few years, but everyone was already thinking about it. I listened and watched the men, gathered in the office at lunchtime, talking about soccer with more passion than if they were talking about women. Women need to be protected, they need to be thought about, and all of that takes time and care. But football always exists on its own; it's an entity that feeds on itself every week, a beast sometimes chaotic but that always enters homes like a pet, through the television screen or the radio speaker, adapting to the life of each house or apartment, or shack in a shantytown, or unfinished housing project. In the housing complexes, the march could be heard, along with the sound of boots and the clicks of gunfire in the hallways where some kid watched everything, crouched in a corner. Doors kicked in, if there were any, bodies dragged down stairs. And the next day, the ball kept rolling on the makeshift pitch the kids had set up between the Juan Domingo and Evita pavilions, number 1 or number 17, A or C or D, whichever it was, in La Tablada, in Caseros, or in Villa Domínico.

While we worked, some of us listened to the radio. It was almost always the soccer program, sometimes a song by Palito Ortega or José Larralde, and every now and then the military march. And occasionally a news broadcast that made us cringe, but which was nevertheless useful to listen to on occasion to find out what was really happening in the streets at that moment. And that's how the name Gloria Sanmarco became increasingly common. By the time I received her contact information, several weeks of intense and violent demonstrations had already passed in the streets around Congress, as

well as in Córdoba and Rosario. The news reports indicated that the left-wing protester, the Montonera Gloria Sanmarco, had spoken at each one. She couldn't be everywhere, of course, but I couldn't guarantee it either. That woman was surrounded by an aura that, for better or worse, preceded her and left traces wherever she went. The military never spoke out directly against her; perhaps they thought that giving a woman so much importance was a sign of insecurity, a demeanor to a mere schoolteacher who had joined the rebels. They pursued her, we knew, and she was often captured, but they released her almost immediately. Who paid the price for her freedom, even if it was temporary? She was like a bird everyone needed to catch, because her squawks and low flights were a nuisance, but they couldn't keep her in a cage. Perhaps because she screamed even louder, or because her sustenance demanded what they couldn't give her: their own bodies, perhaps, as valuable as what they called power or money. Or simply the pleasure of doing what one wants to do.

A strange psychology, difficult to understand when you are in the middle of the storm, the shipwreck, or specifically in the middle of a street where shots come from all sides, from doors and windows of family buildings, where bombs explode on the asphalt next to the old man's newsstand where he sells them with his son, where tanks advance along Avenida de Mayo or Rivadavia or Corrientes towards the Obelisk, a phallic symbol that no one wants to acknowledge, that women have looked at with shame for many years, and in which men find permission for everything, and I mean absolutely *everything.*

And it is there that Gloria will meet with her group tonight for another demonstration against the military government. During the afternoon, law enforcement will assemble to prevent it, after having raided nearly fifty houses, businesses, and warehouses in the Flores neighborhood, in Quilmes, and in many other neighborhoods of the capital and the suburbs where the rebels were known to have indoctrination and meeting centers. The locations of the Armed Forces' detention centers were also known, but this was not reported in the news.

Military marches simulate wars in the psyches of ordinary men. They conquer and overwhelm reason. That's why I felt my hands tied when military music drifted in through the windows of my office or my house from the radio or the

convulsing streets, almost always at night, before dinner, when I was about to read, which for me is the freest act of humankind.
In contrast, the name Gloria, so closely associated with military actions, war and victories, was for everyone, even for her would-be executioners, a kind of symbol that served her, even at the expense of their own contrary intentions, as a protective halo, at least for a time, which was longer than we all expected.
Looking at Beltrame sitting behind his desk, reviewing evidence with his gold-rimmed glasses, his hair slightly graying, his beard neatly trimmed, and his mustache adorned with soft tips that seemed to have been inherited from another decade, I wondered which of the two was the other's guardian angel. Neither was an angel, or at least not a good one; they were simply a man and a woman who loved each other, probably above, or below, the conventions and the reality that crushed them. Sometimes one carried the burden, sometimes the other. Whether it was love or the most intense despair, they met where no one would look for them, because they didn't need to know. There were microphones everywhere, like eagles perched on the telephone poles in front of the building; there were spies, low and dark like sewer rats, spying from the shadowy curbs.
Let them have their way, it must have been written in the military reports. That's what the guys in the newsroom were saying, imagining romantic intrigues in places where killing machines had been perfected after centuries of learning and error. University classrooms and military base hangars with desks transformed into electric chairs.
Yes, I too have succumbed to idiocy . Whether it's football or poetry, imagination is not a weapon, but a fool's paradise.

The thing is, that night the rally was going to take place—if you could call it that—although by this point, these demonstrations downtown had ceased to be political gatherings and had become continuous clashes between the Montoneros, as anyone who protested against the government was called, whether left or right, sincere or opportunistic, student or retiree. In other words, anyone who wasn't afraid, because there were bombs in the streets and gunfire on the buses, and you could be arrested simply for giving the

soldier on guard a dirty look. And they, the rank-and-file soldiers, were so young that they were afraid too, but they were like lambs with standard-issue weapons, searching for other weapons under the skin of others. And since what isn't seen generates more fear than what is visible, the soldiers, obedient because they had no other choice, distrusted before asking questions and struck before listening. Not all of them were like that, of course, but as always, sometimes the exception proves the rule, and what happened once began to happen many times, when the boundaries of fear spread on both sides, not in height, but in extent. The eyes of a beardless cadet have their limits, but behind them are the eyes with war binoculars of the officers.

I got up and looked out the window. Lines of activists marched down the street, blocking traffic, carrying signs and slogans written with and without spelling mistakes. I wondered how anyone could possibly take them seriously with all those outdated, trite, and tired phrases: Perón, social justice, or the law of the hairy one and the bison. Above the marchers was the same old patrician class: the unions who slept on mattresses of dollars, snoring like oxen only to wake up mid-morning and rant against the government into some official microphone.

We were on the fifth floor, and the window overlooked San Martín. To one side, Corrientes had gone dark for about half an hour before the lights of the shops and theaters slowly began to grow. San Martín, narrow as it was, was a hive of people that flowed onto the avenue. They would make quite a journey: they would walk along Corrientes to 9 de Julio, then to Avenida de Mayo, and then back along the river to reach the Plaza. So many detours, I thought to myself; I didn't feel like going out and following them. I looked at my colleagues, some writing, others smoking with their legs up on their desks, waiting for the end of the day.

"Okay," I said, standing with my hands on my hips. "Who's coming with me?"

"Where to, Ceci?" one of them asked me, it doesn't matter which one, because in the shadows that grew as evening fell, fighting in the air next to the windows, against the white lights on the ceiling, indifferent, icy, typical of a wake, all the faces seemed the same to me: corpses that only had living hands

to grab a cigarette, to kill themselves by hitting the keys of the typewriter, or to scratch their crotch without the slightest hint of dissimulation.
"To cover the demonstration," I replied.
- Do you want to die, Ceci? I don't.
It was Marizza who spoke.
Braulio, the director's right-hand man, came to the defense of the work. He clapped his hands, calling for order, and raised his voice like a teacher trying to get her students in line. When he did that, his characteristic mannerisms came through, and the others could do nothing but laugh and do the exact opposite of what he expected. But this time Beltrame appeared, without a tie and with his shirt unbuttoned. The hair on his chest was the same color as his mustache, dark brown with golden highlights from the light shining directly on him. He wasn't looking at us because a silvery glare blinded his glasses.
-Taboada and Scarfionne , you cover it. I want anything in press for the first edition.
Scarfionne, the Italian man , gave me a dirty look; he didn't like women who worked, but he was a gentleman, that's for sure. He said that looking after me and making sure the proletarians didn't grope me prevented him from doing his job in peace.
"Don't worry ," I said as soon as she looked at me. "I lost my virginity a long time ago, and I don't miss it."
The others laughed, and I saw Beltrame look at me with sad eyes. She had taken off her glasses under the pretext of cleaning the lenses and was watching our reactions. Braulio settled into his role as assistant, abandoning that of the snubbed teacher, and it was then that I made the connection: Gloria Sanmarco, the elementary school teacher who perhaps never actually taught, would be one of the march's leaders. Why had she decided to hold it that night, at that hour? I would have liked to ask her. Whenever she was the organizer, the violence began as evening fell. It was something like a fondness for darkness, or perhaps simply a mania for going against the grain. But the truth was that the blackouts caused many to save their lives, hiding in doorways, squeezing into building lobbies, or forcing open the metal shutters of any business.

In Beltrame's gaze, I sensed something akin to complicity. No, it wasn't yet, but rather a plea for complicity. I, a woman, would confront the other woman. Bautista Beltrame was asking me to. Treat her well, he begged me with his eyes.

We went downstairs and out into the street. Tano Scarfionne had his camera. He'd left Marizza behind. He was going to photograph everything he could, and for the rest he relied on my auditory memory, even though I didn't want to admit it.

" You have the recorder on all the time," he told me as we went down in the elevator. A couple of office workers who were leaving early were looking at us with alarm.

Are you going to the march? Will we be able to take the subway? What should we do?

I were you, I'd stay in the building. Everything's blocked off, going out into the streets... mmm ... I wouldn't advise it...

Scarfionne reveled in this display of cynicism, frightening the poor fellows whose wives must be sitting glued to the television, watching the march unfold and waiting for the doorbell to ring—some anxious and worried, others angry and offended, but all knowing that men are liars. Any excuse was enough for them to be late: a meeting at a bar with friends, a packed bus, a transportation strike, a political demonstration, and even death itself was a good enough excuse not to return home, where their wives waited, their thoughts spinning on an endless merry-go-round of conflicting emotions, riding those peeling wooden horses to the tune of old, out-of-tune music that would one day stop. Knowing that on that day the doorbell would never ring again, and that there would be one less person on that derailed merry-go-round of their lives.

The street was teeming with people. The building's doorman kept the gates locked. After he locked them again, wishing us luck, we made our way onto the sidewalk, where the curious onlookers who weren't participating in the march were huddled together, still and grumpy. There was a din of singing and drumming, shouts, and a few shrieks from young women whose origins I couldn't discern. The whistles of the security guards on duty were deafeningly insistent, but they were merely a formal escort before the arrival of the

gendarmes, who were expected any moment. We knew, because we had seen them from our window, that on Corrientes Avenue there were already lines of soldiers formed and a couple of tanks standing still, as if asleep.

"Let's go to San Martín, Ceci," the Italian man said, raising his voice to be heard. "There's no point in continuing the whole march. There's going to be chaos in the Plaza."

He was right; it was stupid to tire yourself out walking only to write later what everyone saw: the long, slow march, interrupted sometimes by shoving and pushing, by the occasional fight on street corners where traffic was stopped and drivers honked their horns or got out to protest. Banners were held at different heights above their heads, and every now and then one would fall, trampled underfoot.

We followed the chaotic caravan down the middle of the street toward Rivadavia. At the corner of Sarmiento, another of the many columns gathered, joining together at different corners, like streams forming secondary rivers flowing into the main one. I realized that this time everything seemed well organized: the number of people was impressive, and the order they tried to maintain was astonishing. There were no unnecessary provocations, no insulting shouts, no gunshots or bombs, not yet. And that's why I was afraid, and I looked at the Italian, who was hiding his face behind the camera. With each click, I felt a tiny tremor, the most a man like him could allow himself: age and professionalism prevented him from feeling anything other than resentment and enormous contempt for all of it. How many times had I seen the same thing throughout his career? The result was always the same, but he seemed ecstatic despite the unyielding disenchantment rooted in his soul. The city and its people fascinated him. He'd told me once, or perhaps it was that very afternoon, amidst all the noise, when the overwhelming reality stirred his imagination. " You know, Ceci," he said, "sometimes I'd like to jump into one of those tanks and fire at the balconies. All those stupid people who commit political suicide in every election and then try to go on living their sleepless lives in those shitty hovels, with dogs barking like mad, arguing all day Sunday, with sour faces all week long, and where the only fun is badmouthing anyone for half an hour on a street corner, or in some seedy bar watching a cockroach crawl across the floor so they can step on it and then

smile, feel pleased with that feat, the only one they'll manage that day, until God is kind enough to deliver another similar prize."

Scarfionne was right when he philosophized like that. I was looking at the balconies of the buildings that rose from both sides of San Martín Street. People were looking this way and that, some with their mate gourds in hand, others with their lapdogs barking through the balcony railings. I wish it would fall, I thought, and I laughed inwardly. Poor animal, victim of its owners, poor people, victims of their “owners.” Scarfionne was right, somehow, people always get the government they deserve. But what can we do if they hold a gun to our heads every day and order us what to do? When we finally realize it, there are no weapons left but in our minds, and the behavior continues. I thought about those dogs, specimens for Pavlov's study of conditioned reflexes. Which of all those men and women knew who they were, enough to look in the mirror and reflect? And yet Pavlov was one of the few who had been victims of the popularization of science, in the magazine Billiken , for example.

It was almost dark when we arrived at Rivadavia and crossed into the plaza. The government house was surrounded by barricades, and long lines of gendarmes stood with their weapons at the ready. The demonstration was already very large, so much so that it seemed to overwhelm even the organizers at times—men I recognized from having appeared on television and in the press many times, militants of the official left. But there were also the rioters who wore hoods like criminals, because that's what they were, even though they proclaimed the freedom they shouted in raucous cries while simultaneously destroying everything with bombs, indifferent to those they were hurting. Should I mourn the dead soldiers whose duty to obedience was the latent cross they carried on each one of their shoulders? Or should I mourn the children killed on buses hit by those bombs, or the women lying in the streets, or the men who were simply running to escape one bomb only to be brought down by another that wasn't meant for them, but to bring down a system that affected everyone, guilty and innocent, victims and perpetrators? Because we were all of those things, sometimes one, sometimes another, depending on the streets we walked and the thoughts that carried us. Rancor

turned us into monsters who killed with their imaginations, or grief weighed us down like wingless angels.

Suddenly, the march stopped. We were pushed from one side to the other, and we couldn't help but be swept along by the crowd. The twilight sky was clear, the buildings on the other blocks looked strangely distant, the mercury vapor lights seemed so dim in that Buenos Aires dusk that I nevertheless felt as if I were in an immense field filled with hairy heads with their arms raised, emitting a single cry like animals being led to slaughter. The ridiculous palm trees in the plaza, that stupid attempt to resemble a Latin American country we never were, added a strange touch to the landscape. Yes, I told myself, the resemblance goes way back, and we have been so stupid that we look into the distance seeing nothing but the desert of historical absurdity, failing to see the depth of the pit we have dug in our idiosyncrasies, be it of race or species, physical or psychological. Classifications are methods, nothing more, but they have confined us to the superficiality of illusions: one gazes at the other, emitting a discourse in the dialectic that is nothing more than the inversion of the others. And we do not look into the darkness of the depths, where they all succumb and form the monstrosity that characterizes us: that which we will never understand.

Meanwhile, we march and protest, and we let ourselves be overwhelmed by the weapons of the goddess ignorance. The military was right sometimes; knowledge doesn't destroy ignorance. That's why they haven't prohibited many of the things they were supposed to prohibit, but rather the learning of intelligence, which is not wisdom. It's something else entirely: a behavior that never stops changing because it's an association of ideas that feed off each other every minute of human history. A set of opinions where classifications aren't important, but rather the way they are expressed: behavior, conversation, dedication. Intelligence isn't the path to eternal wisdom or eternal life as sects or religions understand it, but rather the ambivalent feeling, the incongruous symbiosis of achievement and failure, of satisfaction and disenchantment, that makes us sit in any old bar, drinking a short, black coffee, watching people pass by on the sidewalk, some with an old dog on a leash, others leaning on a cane at a snail's pace.

They're not at the march this afternoon; they're at home, dying. That's what intelligence is: accepting the inevitable and accepting the struggles each of us may face. Even those who commit suicide know this.

The noise from megaphones and microphones echoed like the cries of prehistoric animals, then a feedback loop, and then a moment of silence. A shot rang out from nowhere, and almost everyone looked around. On the stage the activists had erected in barely two hours, right under the noses of the gendarmes, without anyone stopping them, but knowing it was a ticking time bomb, several men and a woman climbed onto it. There stood Gloria Sanmarco, the undisputed leader of that entire fringe sector, at least within the opposition. Everyone wanted to categorize her within some specific political or social group, but although she acted according to dogmas expressed in some improvised manifesto one night during that decade in Argentina, in some suburban committee near the capital, she acted and contradicted herself constantly. The methods, she said, were different every day, some even in the morning before getting out of bed, others in the afternoon. But the goal was the same. The de facto government had to end. Who would replace him? Some would answer, "There's always a fool." I would reply, "The dog on the corner barks, but doesn't bite."

She stood up and grabbed the megaphone. She held it with dexterity, as if it were weightless, because she wasn't a tall woman, nor did she appear strong. From afar, where I stood, peering through the heads and arms that blocked my view, I saw her dark brown hair, long but no longer than her shoulders, parted on the left, somewhat untidy, but easily smoothed with a slight toss of her head when it fell across her forehead, or tucked behind her ear with a hand. Her voice was strong, yet appropriate for a primary school teacher who had to manage forty students in a classroom resembling a shed. She said the same old thing, what everyone expected: the ignominy that could not continue, the crimes that had to be stopped (with more crimes? No one asked, but it was understood). She spoke of the homeland (but not of God, of course), and elevated it to the level of the poor who awaited hope in the shantytowns. Her approach was arguably original for that era and for what was expected of a leader. Her status as a woman granted her unusual privileges: some viewed her with filial affection, others as a strategy that temporarily disrupted

traditional politics. All of this was exploited, as in any war, to win small battles. And Gloria was winning them.

Then the shooting started from the ranks of the armed men. First, it was a series of volleys into the air, which we could consider a warning. Then, a man on stage was hit by a bullet, and we saw him fall and disappear over the edge of the platform. Gloria threw down the megaphone and made futile efforts to go down and help him; the others had already grabbed her and were taking her away to protect her, because it was obvious that she was the target of the attack. But who knows, perhaps it was a strategy by the government to sow fear in a terrain they knew was very difficult, or perhaps by the party itself to renew their image as victims in the eyes of the general public, and especially the international community. We knew very well that this was manipulated by the media, and the media were puppets of the Americans.

Be that as it may, my story is just an anecdote, tinged with doubts and contradictory, distorted, or imagined opinions. The point is, all the expected commotion erupted; people around us started running because bullets were whizzing past our heads, and the explosions from those among us began to reverberate and pollute the air. Some were simply stun grenades, which mingled with the tear gas canisters from the military. Rubber bullets hurt and left people on the ground in pain, easily captured. But I also saw a lot of blood, more and more of it on the trampled grass and tiles. On a bench, a man was clutching his stomach, blood trickling down his legs. Some tried to lift him, but they quickly left. The soldiers dragged him away. I came across many others doing the same thing, dragging dead or unconscious people by their legs or arms, or simply those who resisted.

The Italian guy was taking photo after photo, and I think he'd forgotten about me. The tape recorder I was carrying had run out, so I changed it, but someone pushed me and it fell to the floor. I couldn't pick it up; other feet had already trampled it, and all that was left was a shattered plastic casing. Scarfionne was afraid I'd been hurt because I was on the floor. I was going to tell him not to worry, but I didn't have time. A shot hit him in the head. I saw blood gushing from his ear, and when he dropped the camera, he grabbed his head and threw himself to the floor, writhing in pain. Just as I was getting up, someone grabbed my arms. I was screaming, cursing, and I ended up crying

when I felt myself being dragged away by two soldiers who reeked of smoke and iron, and even the smell of the shit with which their own bodies had undoubtedly expressed the fear they felt.
The divided obedience, of course, made them drag me away from Tano's body, whom I saw for the last time, half-dead, dying after so many years of resisting, but still doing his job. That's how those who have the sad honor of living like that die.

About four hours later I woke up in a cell. I must have fallen asleep from exhaustion, or maybe they beat me. I don't remember anything after I saw the sky and the asphalt, both at the same time, as they dragged me through a crowd toward a truck, and then the darkness of my cell phone, the smell of urine and sweat, and the questions of the frightened fools asking in the gloom if anyone was there, begging for help. They were crying, the poor things. But I wasn't crying, I was just trying to remember if I had left Tano breathing or if I had already given up my soul to Mitre, for example, whom I admired so much. If old Bartolo had come to get him in the middle of the plaza, seeing a war he couldn't have imagined in his time, reciting, perhaps, a fragment of his translation of Dante. And he had taken him away, just like that. Talking and arguing, invisible in the midst of everyone, blessing the homeland they had thought about for so long, for better or for worse, with kindness or with selfishness.
Back in the cell, I checked my wristwatch for the time, but it had been taken. My pants were wet and torn. Had I been raped, I thought, not without irony? I touched myself and it was just urine, either mine or the urine already on the floor. There were a lot of women with me. There was barely a meter of free space in that dark room, lit by a single bulb in the ceiling of the corridor outside the cell. The others were talking in hushed tones; they had all undoubtedly been captured in the plaza.
"What time is it?" I asked randomly.
The one sitting on the floor, with her knees bent and elbows resting on them, said:
-Three in the morning.
"And how do you know ?" I asked.

-You can tell the time by the shadows and the smell.
- Were you there many times?
- And who wouldn't? You 're new, aren't you?
- Is it obvious?
-Of course, because of the silly questions you ask , and because of those pretty hands you have . What were you doing in the plaza? Are you some nosy little girl trying to befriend the working class so you can show off to your posh friends? Or did you ever read Rosa Luxemburg and now you think you're a martyr?
The sarcasm didn't affect me; on the contrary, it comforted me that even in that place and time there was enough intelligence to escape its vulgar circumstances.
"I read Rosa, of course. But I don't think she's easy to imitate, if I've understood her correctly. There's only one who resembles her, or at least tries to imitate her with some dignity."
The other one looked at me; I know because I saw the gleam in her eyes, even though her features were hidden in shadow. She took my hands and stroked my fingers.
-You're a writer...
I laughed.
-My fingers give me away, of course. I'm more of a journalist, that's why I was in the square.
"Well, it's better this way. I suppose you'll be a walking tape recorder, recording everything we do and say. If you were from television, we'd kill you before they did..."
"I'm from Radar, as conservative as they come." I said it knowing that sincerity was a risk I had to take if I expected sincerity. I was in a place where few of my colleagues would ever be. It was an opportunity, that's how I saw it at the time. The insinuation the woman made about them... I didn't understand it, I didn't want to understand it.
The other woman fell silent. She stood up and sat on the mattress, which, oddly enough, was unoccupied. All the others were either sitting or lying on the floor, some standing with their arms crossed, cold and afraid, or hugging

each other. That mattress belonged to the woman I was talking about; they had all respected it as if she were different.
Then I guessed, even before I saw his face barely illuminated by the little light in the hallway.
"Aren't you afraid?" she asked, inviting me to leave the wet ground and sit next to her.
-A little, but the novelty of the experience makes me think more and feel less.
-That's how we defend ourselves, all of us, men and women. What's your name ?
-Cecilia Taboada.
-I think I read some of your articles. You write very well, that's what caught my attention; journalists are so lazy when it comes to reading and proofreading.
-Time is part of the job...and that ruins us.
-Bautista says the same thing.
There it was, the revelation, finally. But why would he have chosen me? Perhaps he knew that this sort of confidante wouldn't have a chance to write anything the next day.
- Beltrame?
Don't play dumb. Bautista talks about all of you, and you wouldn't believe the pride in his voice. Braulio's perspicacity, Taboada's lyricism, Sarfio 's good taste ...
Then I broke down and cried.
"They killed him," I said.
She did not comfort me.
- The Italian? I should have guessed it when I saw him from afar from the stage.
- Is it true that you're a teacher?
-Yes, I graduated from teaching when I was nineteen years old, there in Dolores.
- Did you exercise?
-No more than a year. I was in charge of the seventh-grade students at a school in La Boca. They didn't even pay me for six months.
That's why you left...

"It wasn't about the money, but... I don't know... disillusionment. I couldn't stand to see all those kids wasting their lives. They were so intelligent, but they didn't read or listen; they just carried knives and guns to school, and those who didn't were doing drugs or coming home drunk. They were so intelligent..."

- But how did you know they were if...?

"Because they were talking, Cecilia. Some of them would gather around my desk and we'd chat. We'd smoke, me sitting at the table with my legs crossed, knowing it somehow excited them, but it was the only way to get their attention. They'd stand with one hand in their pocket and the other holding the cigarette to their mouth. Others would sit on the floor, simply listening. Still others would get distracted by drawing obscene pictures on the blackboard. They'd talk about their parents, if they had any, about the misery that was only misery to those of us who didn't know it, because for them it was everyday life. The word 'filth' doesn't exist for those who live in filth; it's simply the life they lead, what they know. The rest doesn't exist. But every now and then a word can unleash a cataclysm. You know that Chinese proverb that says the flight of a butterfly can cause an earthquake on the other side of the world? That's the word of a teacher. I'd say 'France,' for example, and they'd frown, sulking." I would mention Pardo López, and they would smile. And then, if I told them that Pardo had traveled to France, their expressions would shift to a curiosity that was the very essence of humanity. There, in that fragile point of time and space, everything lay. Knowing how to seize it was the elixir sought by all wise men since the beginning of history. It is so incredibly difficult to grasp that, if it happens even once, one should at least feel like a kind of god.

- And did it happen to you?

Once, and I only got halfway there. There was a boy, one of the most withdrawn. He hardly ever spoke unless you spoke to him. He was ugly, had a lot of facial hair, and was already fifteen. He'd repeated two years in a row and there was no sign he was going to improve. The headmistress took him on as a favor, because the bishop wanted to stay in good standing with the Benevolent Society and occasionally took in some of their protégés. The boy's mother, as far as I know, was always a whore, and a drunk now and then. The

guys he slept with must have been giving him drugs, because he almost always had the shiny eyes of someone who sniffs glue. That was the least of it. He walked hunched over, and although the other boys made fun of him, they ended up leaving him alone because he knew how to defend himself with his fists and worse. I even discovered he was intelligent enough to plot outlandish, elaborate forms of violence.

"He was a potential killer," I said.

"I would be, Cecilia, very soon. And I knew it before, but what could I do? Once, on one of those occasions, he said to me, 'May I ask you something, miss?' 'Yes,' I answered, astonished to hear him join the conversation. 'Do you think I can be cured?' I had finally broken through the wall that separated us, and we were talking about what we pretended not to see. But I couldn't be so direct, lest he withdraw again. I had to force him to confess. 'Cured of what?' I asked him. He raised his hands and arms, revealing the hair of a grown man on the body of a fifteen-year-old boy, with the mind of a child, perhaps eight, right in the space between innocence and the discovery of malice. 'My mother says,' he began to stammer, 'that I am a curse.' The other boys laughed, but fell silent when they saw my expression." "Charly," I said—that's what they called him—"there once was a man named Darwin, and he discovered that all humans descended from monkeys. We're not sick; it's our heritage. I don't know if you understand ." The others, poor fools, started mocking me, imitating monkey gestures. I took off my shoe and banged the heel on the blackboard. Everyone fell silent. I punished them with chores I knew they wouldn't do, but at least my anger seemed to stop them. When the hour was over, they left, and Charly came over again, this time on his own. "What's wrong?" I asked him. "Is it true, Miss Gloria?" "Of course it's true, Charly." I took his hand and led him to the school library, a small room with no more than fifty books, all elementary school textbooks and a few donated encyclopedias. I looked on the shelves, and we sat down. " Look ," I said, opening an animal encyclopedia. I showed him the pictures of the monkeys most similar to humans. I saw him open his eyes, ecstatic, amazed to see what he'd never seen outside the mirror. He ran his fingers over the paper, as if he wanted to touch the leaves of the trees surrounding the apes. "And where are they?" he asked me. "In many places, Charly. In Africa, mostly, but also here

in Argentina." "And can we go see them?" I promised to take him to the zoo one of these days.
There were sounds of gates opening and closing. They had come to look for two women.
- Where are they taking them?
- How should I know!
The atmosphere was broken; we had returned to the reality of that night in Buenos Aires. But Gloria resumed her story when no one else was speaking. They were asleep, or listening to her.
"We never went. Time and again they denied me permission to take them to the zoo. It was obvious they were older, troubled boys, and I wouldn't be able to control them if something unexpected happened. I couldn't take Charly alone either; the headmistress asked the priest, and the priest contacted the Beneficence Society. His mother was in rehab, and when she finished, there were elaborate ceremonies honoring the Society's director, who was Colonel Ansaldi's sister-in-law. And Ansaldi, according to sources, was the one who supported the president's election. The mother relapsed into her vices, of course, and the boy was sent to an asylum. He raped and killed women later on."
Gloria was silent and looked at me guiltily.
"Don't look at me like that. I'm not so naive as to think that if I'd taken him to the zoo, his life would have been different. But remember what we were talking about: the breaking point where things seem so clear that there's nothing left to do but take them. That point is irreversible: either it expands to let us in, or it seals shut forever. Most people, the vast majority, don't even know it exists; some glimpse it only in dreams; other privileged few have experienced it and remember it with melancholy. One or two have taken advantage of it, and that despite themselves."
- And you, Gloria?
"I saw him the day I left school. I quit when I found out Charly had been expelled. If that school served any purpose, it was to protect him. The classroom was the womb he missed. The word made flesh, contracting into a discourse of attachments and knowledge, because that's what education is. And now they fill their mouths with the words 'freedom' and 'homeland,'

giving them meanings precisely contrary to those they have in any dictionary. But it's well known that dictionaries have long been obsolete objects that everyone constructs according to their own whims."

- And for you, is democracy the best form of government?

"It's the government of fools and idealists, and above all, of intelligent people like Charly. Let me explain. Charly developed his intelligence by plotting the murders; I think that's what I helped him discover. When I said I only got halfway there, I meant the good that crucial point can bring about. But I was also a fool, forgetting that malice, or that uncertain thing we call evil, or sickness, or whatever, can't also grow in skill and see its own potential. The photos of the monkeys were an acknowledgment of belonging, but not in the sense I was trying to give it, the ancestral sense of humanity. I had forgotten that humanity also includes resentment, anger, torture, and death."

That's partly my fault.

- So you prefer anarchy?

"As an ideal system, yes, but that's falling back into idealism and mere utopias. If the most experienced nations haven't been able to endure it, how can we expect it from us? I prefer democracy if at least the stupid and the corrupt are displayed in shop windows, like naked mannequins, so they're easily identifiable. And in the back room are the clothes they wear depending on the situation."

I must have fallen asleep. My feet ached, and I didn't have my insulin vials. I would have gone into hyperglycemia if I'd been in the cell for more than a day. But I didn't say anything. Tano's death had left me feeling down, almost numb. Only Gloria Sanmarco's story had interested me enough to have memorized every word and expression in order to reproduce it verbatim in the interview.

At about six in the morning, they came to take all of us out, except for Gloria. The guards opened the gates with sour faces, so to speak. Behind them, some high-ranking officers stood guard, hands behind their backs, caps on, uniforms immaculate. Gloria didn't get up. I turned around and she said to me:

-Tell Bautista to stop looking for me.

-I didn't know that already…

"It doesn't matter, just tell him that. He's obsessed with killing everyone, even himself, for a woman. And like all men, he doesn't know that women are worth far more than they think, or that we're not worth their slightest effort. The rank they place us in is merely the vain illusion their mothers instilled in them."

That day remains in my memory as disconnected fragments that I must painstakingly piece together to give them the correct chronology. Mario and Braulio were in the Peugeot 404 outside the Retiro police station. Mario was inside, smoking, and Braulio was standing on the curb, leaning against the hood . When he saw me, he hugged me like a child about to cry. Mario got out and said to me:
- Have a cigarette, Ceci.
When Braulio let go of me, I fainted. I think they put me in the back seat, and I felt the car engine and the car spinning around and around the streets. I heard them arguing about what to do. Two adults who seemed scared because their sister or mother had collapsed and they didn't know what to do. They took me to Rivadavia Hospital, where Bernardo works, which is why it took so long, they told me later. But they kept arguing, blaming each other, saying I could have died with all the driving we did.
Bernardo had arrived a little while earlier; it was probably barely eight in the morning. I had called him the previous afternoon to tell him I was going to cover the demonstration, and he thought I'd be back at the newsroom afterward writing for the first edition, so he was prepared. But he hadn't expected to see me at the hospital. When he saw my colleagues, he grabbed his head, or so I was told, standing in the middle of the corridor as he watched the stretcher I was lying on approach, carried by a stretcher bearer and the other two men, pale and frightened.
"Doctor…" Braulio began, with that false condescension with which he submissively and willingly placed himself before anyone he considered superior to him, which reminded me of Uriah Heep, but without true malice, only a vanity that was always ineffective.

Mario intervened, stubbing out his cigarette when he saw Ruiz's challenging look. He explained everything, but it wasn't necessary. Bernardo took care of admitting me and running the tests.

I stayed until the afternoon, and when I was feeling better, we went home. He helped me up the stairs to Sarmiento's apartment. He unmade the bed he had made that very morning after sleeping alone all night. He scolded himself for not having called me at the newsroom that morning; he hadn't even seen the news about the riots at the march until he got to the hospital and bought the newspaper at the corner stand. Then he imagined the worst, and it was at that moment that we met in the hallway.

As he helped me lie down, I told him not to worry, that no one expected what had happened.

- And you're telling me this, you who are more aware of all this than I am?

- How should I know! Let's not argue, please.

- Forgive me , but it drives me crazy when you neglect yourself. I'm scared, Ceci, and sometimes I don't know how to take care of you...

I stroked his beard, I stroked his closed eyelids with my thumbs. I didn't want to see him cry, not him, who was my sustenance and my refuge.

He slept with me until nightfall, but he kept getting up to go back and forth to the kitchen to bring me snacks, checking my blood pressure and blood sugar. That night we made love; I needed it. I knew my body was betraying me, and I wanted to show him I was in control of my life. If my body suffered, if my feet were bruised and my face pale, I would show him I could still use him as I pleased. There was a man who desired me, still, an ordinary man, neither too handsome nor too ugly, just an unwavering and virile example of what a man can be: kind or wrathful, patient or hurtful. That was all of that, and that was what I needed. Not a well-mannered gentleman or a cheap puppet, but the animal that cries out and the man who protests. The voice that demands and claims, but then turns to sorrow and melancholy. The hand that caresses the head and the lips that kiss the neck when words have already proven their impotence and their fallacious importance. And the body that draws near to mine in the dead of night in the middle of a city besieged by the same old grim prophecies, which are being fulfilled one by one: violence, weariness, poverty.

There were calls from the office, but Bernardo turned them down, as well as a couple of visits to his house. In the morning I insisted on returning to work. I called Beltrame, who explained what had happened with Scarfionne . The wake had been the day before.

- But why didn't they warn me?

Bernardo, who was listening to me talking with the tube glued to his ear and half crying, gestured for me to hang up.

"No, wait ," I told him. "But Beltrame, for God's sake, I wanted to go with you..."

"You did it, Ceci. I don't think I would have chosen anyone else if I'd known what was going to happen to him. Take the whole week off; the others will handle the important news."

"Okay," I said, and hung up.

I sat down at my desk and started writing. I told Bernardo to go to work; I was fine and needed some peace and quiet. His pacing and worry were unsettling me. Resignation is sometimes everything, necessary and the only possible course of action. He left, and I began to type. Word by word, image by image, the interview with Gloria Sanmarco was transcribed without, I believe, forgetting a thing. The mind's intricacies are beyond comprehension.

In the morning I went to the newspaper office. Two days had passed since the demonstration, and the Buenos Aires sky was like any other day: cloudy and sunny, humid, cold and then hot, only to cool down again as night fell. The streets responded as always to these changes in the weather, which were nothing more than the changes in the personality of the average passerby: stumbling on broken sidewalks, the unbearable wait at traffic lights, the jostling of someone walking with their head down, an ambulance on a corner assisting a retiree in a bank queue, two police officers chatting with their arms crossed, women pushing strollers with shopping bags, men in suits or sportswear lost in thought, contemplating nothingness and everything, and how to grasp it all.

In the newsroom, they watched me enter with astonishment, and it took them a while to greet me with applause and hugs.

"But how come you're coming so soon, Ceci?" Mario asked me.

Scarfionne 's desk , empty. Beltrame had left the office because of the commotion. He looked at me and said:
-Come in, ma'am journalist.
I walked over and the others applauded timidly again this time.
Once inside, I sat down in front of Beltrame's desk, who, before sitting down again, offered me a glass of water.
"There are some tissues over there," she said, pointing to the cardboard box on the desk.
We smiled to ease the situation.
"Thank you for the deal," I said.
-You're welcome, Ceci. All this...I mean, what happened with Tano...is worth it because you're okay.
I couldn't go on with that. I handed him the folder with the interview manuscript.
- What is this?
-The article covering the march, late but complete and with the added bonus of an interview that no one else, not even any other media outlet, could do before and will do for a long time, it seems to me.
He opened the folder and began flipping through the pages quickly. It was obvious it would affect him, but I could see no other alternative than professionalism to counterbalance those feelings.
"I'm surprised once again, Madam Journalist. The truth is, I don't know what to say..."
- How about a raise?
We smiled again, there was nothing more to it.
He promised to read it that afternoon and tell me when we would publish it; it was necessary to choose the exact moment to surprise everyone.
Go home and rest until the weekend. I'll call you.
I stayed for a while talking with the guys; they wanted details about what had happened, especially about the prison. They knew they were forcing me, but I felt good about the fact that they weren't treating me with kid gloves, like some weak woman. At that moment, I wasn't weak; I don't think they even saw me as a woman, but as one of them, without prejudice or preconceived

notions. I felt dizzy, so I drank some tea and ate some finger sandwiches they'd sent someone to get.

I said goodbye five minutes before the bus was due to pass by the corner of San Martín and Corrientes. As I descended in the elevator cage of that old Buenos Aires building, I thought about the age-old dream that the porteños had always lived by: excessive courage, supposed honesty, a controversial work ethic, questionable intelligence, and vain culture. All half-baked, as if seeing themselves in the distorting mirror of the immense Río de la Plata. Its size and its name were a symbol of what we are: a mirage of wealth on a muddy street.

Two days later, I received the manuscript at home. It was delivered by one of the cadets, who changed almost daily. Before I could open it, the phone rang. It was Beltrame, letting me know he was sending it with the corrections, so I could review them before publication. It would appear in the Sunday edition, in the Politics supplement that came out once a month. I was responsible for the layout of the entire ten pages and for supervising the other articles dedicated to Tano.

I sat down to review the corrections.

I should warn you that I don't usually make copies; it wasn't my custom because I started in journalism without any degrees or prior studies other than my literary background. Perhaps it was the naiveté of someone who undervalued their own work. Whatever the reason, I never gave it much thought until today, when I saw the cross-outs Beltrame had made across many paragraphs, with arrows pointing to the margins and added phrases in his messy, cramped handwriting, full of abbreviations. What bothered me as I read was that the cross-outs weren't done with the same pen he'd used, but with a black marker that obscured the original writing. If I wasn't able to reconstruct it, entire phrases and paragraphs were lost.

I had wanted to cancel certain things, many things. I knew, obviously, about my usual mistake of always giving him the originals. Beltrame's ambivalence resurfaced. Who was that man?

It was Wednesday, and on Friday I went back to the newsroom. I went in the mid-afternoon, when I knew that between two and three o'clock I usually went out for lunch before the evening edition.

-Hi Cecilia, I told you that…
-Yes, I know, Betrame , but you know me . We need to sort something out before giving the go-ahead for the edition.
- What is it that you don't like?
I sighed deeply.
-Little of what remained, after the cross-outs.
Beltramn sat down and lit a Particulares.
-Okay , okay , so what are your criticisms?
-Which almost completely changes the perception of Miss Sanmarco. What she told me gives her a more human and idealistic aspect, offering the public a broader view than the usual one of the subversive and violent woman.
Beltrame looked at me through the smoke he exhaled, as if challenging me.
"I don't agree with highlighting that aspect of her. Perhaps you didn't realize it, but her answers sound fake. It's as if she's trying to sway the government with underhanded tactics..."
I looked at Beltrame. What was that man after? Was he trying to protect Gloria by hiding her and blocking out what he considered her weaknesses? Or did he want to keep his private life all to himself, as if this interview were exposing her for all to see? Since the public woman belonged to everyone, he should keep the other one for himself.
-The diary is yours, Beltrame.
"Don't get like that. Let's do this. I'll give you free rein to do a new version; send it to me tonight with the new cadet..." I snapped my fingers, trying to remember. "...what's the new kid's name...? Never mind. I'm staying until one or two tonight anyway."
We left it at that, and I went back home.
Luckily, Bernardo had a guard, so I felt relieved not to see him spying on me. His vigilance was a concern, of course, but there was no way to contradict him without hurting his feelings. I sat down to review the manuscript, rewrote it, and rescued practically everything I thought I had forgotten and crossed out, and condescended to a few amendments that unnecessarily lengthened the text. Beltrame was a born writer, I knew it; he mastered narrative with a commanding presence, and sometimes he forgot the limitations of the press.

I called the cadet, a scrawny teenager who was always panting as if he were constantly running. I offered him a soda when he arrived.
"Do your parents let you work so late?" I asked him.
-I only have my old man, and he works as a porter at the port and as a night watchman.
- How old are you ?
-Fourteen, miss.
-Okay, go to the newsroom and take good care of this.
I gave him a tip and he was happy.
Braulio called me on Saturday at noon. Beltrame wanted to see me, and he was in a bad mood. I expected as much, but I mustered up my courage and went.
Saturdays were almost busier than the rest of the week. Beltrame had a meeting with the editor of the literary supplement at eleven, and it often stretched well into the afternoon. The editor of the business supplement was also waiting outside, sitting patiently with his round glasses and his folder of notes, which I never saw but imagined was full of numbers and graphs. I ran into Dora Cifuentes, who was doing nothing but delivering proofs for the Mujer supplement, going in and out of the office without warning. She greeted me hurriedly, and her expression told me that Beltrame was in an unbearable mood. I was confident that after the meeting with Leandro Mallea, who had recently been appointed head of the literary department, Beltrame would be calmer.
After an hour, Leandro came out. He hugged me and we exchanged a few words, while I watched Beltrame searching for me with his eyes blinded by the glare of the fluorescent tubes, which were still lit despite the daylight streaming in through the windows.
- Miss Taboada, come in!
Leandro winked at me to reassure me.
Beltrame didn't tell me to sit down. He picked up the envelope I had sent him the night before and said:
-Cecilia, we're not kids to be playing games. I'm not going to continue this back-and-forth of corrections. I don't have the time, and above all, I'm not interested.

- What is it that doesn't interest you? What I think or the topic of the article?
He came closer, and I could smell the tobacco on his breath and the perspiration on his shirt. His tie was tight, and a scent of cologne wafted from his unkempt beard. He wasn't much taller than me, and I looked at him defiantly, and he looked back at me with great anger.
"If Taboada wants war, he'll get it. I'm the face of this newspaper, whether they like it or not. I'm the one who answers to the public. I don't run a cooperative or a backstreet communist publishing house."
I answered ironically:
-I thought it reflected the ideas of a free press.
He threw the envelope on the desk and sat down.
- That's your problem and your ideas!
He looked at his watch.
"There's no time for any further discussion. Either we publish with the corrections I made, or nothing. The tribute to Scarfionne and your notes on the fly will be published. The interview is out of the question."
I was very nervous and sat down. I gripped the edge of the desk and took a sip of water from Beltrame's glass. I didn't give him time to feel sorry for me.
- You know I can take the interview to any media outlet and they would pay me very well, in addition to offering me a job.
He looked at me without mockery.
-You too, you clever little minx. You 're just like all the others. They manipulate our souls and then threaten us. You know I can make sure you never work anywhere again, right?
-Of course I know. Dead and buried I won't write anything.
I got up to leave.
- So what's the final decision?
I grabbed the envelope. There wasn't another copy, unless he'd made it after his corrections. But I didn't think so. I went to the door, but before opening it, I turned around.
-I forgot to tell you, Beltrame, that Gloria gave me a message for you.
He had gone back to flipping through his papers, overwhelmed by the task of having to review the entire new Sunday edition. He looked up and took off his glasses when he heard me.

-She said not to look for her anymore.
When I went out and closed the door, I heard a bang. I imagined a gunshot, and I almost didn't regret it, but it was nothing more than the sharp thud of the desk drawer, and immediately the tireless and final clatter of the typewriter began.

2

I let more than a week go by. Beltrame didn't call me or make any demands about my absence. On Sunday, the special supplement dedicated to Scarfionne came out . There were photos of Tano, both professional and private, from all periods of his life, even from his childhood in Rome during the war. He was a widower and had only one son, who provided all those photographs. I met him the time he came to the newsroom, several years before. He was tall and thin like his father, with a rugged face and a thick but well-groomed beard. He worked in a customs office, I think, and had come to pick him up dressed in a dark suit and tie, his hair a little long but neatly combed. It was like seeing Tano when he was young, without the gray hair and the wrinkles on his forehead, which he said were from worry. Seeing them together, they looked like brothers. Tano had told me that Teo, his son, had been born when he was twenty, to his wife, his only wife, and that she died of cancer a few years after giving birth. She worked as a maid while he studied Philosophy and Letters, working as an amateur journalist at La Prensa.
“I have to give him the best,” he told me that time, “not only because he is my son, but because of the debt I owe to his mother.”
“I don’t think she feels the same way,” I told him.
He shrugged, sitting at his desk, ready to return to work, but he couldn't.
“I got him that job at customs. If he knows how to make the most of it, he’ll retire there. It’s the most I can do for him. He’s very austere and reserved; the few times he speaks, he reminds me of his maternal grandfather, an old-

school, violent anarchist who was hanged by his countrymen in Calabria, a setup of betrayals who wanted to bring him down. If you saw the photos, he’s just like the Calabrian, with those mustaches and those black eyes that study everything they see, and seem to kill him, too.”

I noticed all of this when they returned from lunch. It was a holiday, so Teo had come to visit, but we, of course, didn't have any fixed days off. Teo spoke to me seriously about political matters, a black cigarette dangling from his lips. He had taken off his overcoat and was wearing a shirt and tie, both a grayish color. He was elegant, and his mere presence made him seem so. His voice was slow and low, so much so that you had to strain your ears, so to speak, to avoid missing a word, because his demeanor didn't allow for follow-up questions.

"The Italian guy told me about your grandfather," I said.

-Yes, those were different times, and a different place.

He leaned back in his chair, leaned on the desk and said to me: “But men are equal everywhere, and my friends and I believe it is necessary to preserve good ideas and good feelings, towards humanity, I mean.

I knew what he meant, and I stood there thinking, determined to provoke him a little.

-I don't think anarchists, with their methods, love humanity very much.

He smiled, letting out a snort full of good tobacco.

"Sentimentality is for women...weak women, I mean...and for fools who don't know what they want. Peace? What is peace, if not repressed discord? I'm not talking about permanent war or civil war every other day, but about putting an end to debauchery once and for all."

I would have liked to ask her who she would replace her with, but Tano appeared, interrupting what I had surely been listening to from my desk. He winked at me, and they both left together. They would spend the afternoon walking along Corrientes Avenue and browsing in the used bookstores. I imagined them handling books, one in the philosophy and literature sections, the other in the history and politics sections, sometimes even at the same time.

The supplement, then, was a tribute that drew praise in the following days. Braulio came to see me on Monday night.

- What's Ceci going to do? The boss isn't going to pay you for not working, and you 're not one of those people, either.
-Don't be naive, Braulio, Beltrame is waiting for me to resign so he doesn't have to pay me compensation.
-But I thought you were more proud, not the kind who gets offended and quits.
I didn't know whether to feel flattered or classified like a file.
-I think that more than offended, I'm very angry, and as you know , since they think badly of me, I will act according to what some people think.
-That's immature, if you'll excuse me, like a little girl who's trying to provoke...
- You're right, Braulio.
Neither of them mentioned that my name didn't appear anywhere in the supplement, especially considering that I was Scarfionne 's last colleague at the job that led to his death, and that I was the one who wrote the news about the march that appeared in the main edition, and also the one who wrote one of Tano's epitaphs. Among the twenty pages of the supplement, I found some of my lines, without citation or reference, in many places, and especially in the epitaph that Mario Marizza wrote, which was on the last page with an illustration by Baldessari. Mario finally climbed a few steps, I thought, who knows what he's done.

Leandro Mallea called me to meet at a café downtown. "I need to talk to you," was all he said. We met at "La Academia" on Callao Street. The tapping of the billiard balls was a constant, monotonous music that made reading easier; in fact, it accompanied the tapping with a rhythm that blended with the words being read. The same thing happened in conversations, but those of us talking were less aware of that effect.
I had arrived late because my feet were hurting. In the last six months, three toes had been amputated from both feet. The scars had healed slowly, but I already sensed what Bernardo didn't want to tell me: that the disease was spreading. I rarely saw Leandro. Absorbed in his writing and his son's problem, I think he understood me better than many. He didn't ask me to get

better or to be different. He didn't demand what others, and I myself, demanded: the avoidability of the inevitable.
"How are you ?" he asked after giving me a kiss on the cheek and sitting down. We were at a table by the shop window.
- And how do you see me?
-Stubborn, as always.
He told me about what was expected, about the ambivalent and uncertain atmosphere of the newspaper. Beltrame was almost always nervous, drinking liters of coffee and typing like a madman on his typewriter.
"Or like a serial killer," I said.
-That's on your own, and you'll know why you say it.
Sometimes Leandro's indifference infuriated me; it sounded like the usual "don't get involved " of cowards. But I knew him, and it was simply disdain for what he considered trivial: politics, parties, petty gossip. Feelings like resentment, revenge, and envy were so superficial that there was no point in dwelling on them. Remorse, however, troubled him, guilt intimidated him, and the inconsequentiality of death or the incorruptible decay of the world led him to imagine strange worlds, about which he wrote. I admired his ability to transform the world's atrocities into creation.
-Braulio asked me to talk to you…but wait, don't get ahead of yourself …it's not just because of what you already know , but because they called the newsroom asking for you.
- Who?
-He didn't leave his name. He spoke with Braulio. The guy asked him for your number, and the jerk of course didn't give it to him, he said he had to ask you first.
- And what did he want?
"Don't be alarmed . She said she had some very important scoops related to Gloria Sanmarco. She was the one who wanted to talk to you."
- Doesn't that sound like a trap to you?
"That's what Braulio thought, that's why he called me for advice. You know how much he adores the boss. He's aware of what Beltrame is doing, but all he can do is be condescending when it comes to the object of his idolatry."

"It seems very strange to me that Sanmarco wants to talk to me again; she'd be taking a big risk. I found out she was released the day after I was, and nobody knows where she is."
"Nobody?" Leandro asked, pointing upwards.
-How should I know? It's like a game of cat and mouse.
"Until the mouse gets tired," he said, and ordering a second coffee and three croissants, he took out some stories he wanted to read to me from his leather folder.
When we said goodbye, late into the night, we agreed that the next time the man called, they would give him my phone number. If they were the ones who wanted to kill me, they would have done it by now. I'm not one of those people who matter. But who knows, in this country even a fly could be a suspected spy.
I didn't say anything to Bernardo; he was already worried enough about my health and my job. But he had just started his vacation leave from the hospital when the phone rang. He answered it from the desk where he usually read or wrote science articles. I feared the worst: the next domestic scene filled with arguments and recriminations.
- Ceci, this is for you!
I approached and grabbed the receiver, looking at Bernardo with feigned curiosity. He didn't fall for it, of course. He knew me too well. He looked at me with forced composure and continued reading. In our apartment on Sarmiento Street, we only had one phone line and one extension, so I couldn't move from there, standing by the desk, the receiver pressed to my ear, while he sat a few inches away, seemingly distracted and reading his own things, but paying attention to every word I uttered. All this because he wanted to protect me, and I didn't want to worry him. Both of us acting as victims of the other, with the best of intentions. And I thought of Beltrame and Gloria.
"Hello," I said, the voice sounded familiar.
-Good afternoon, Miss Taboada.
- Who are you?
-Theodore Scarfionne. I'm calling on behalf of Gloria; she would like to see you.
- Why?

-Professionals, without a doubt. I know she's suspicious, but she's sticking with the good relationship they forged that night in prison.
- When and where?
-You will receive the notification through another means; we need to take precautions.
-Alright.
He didn't answer or say hello, the cordiality abbreviated in a tone that sounded again after he hung up.
Bernardo looked up and questioned me without speaking. Then I sat on the desk, separating the heavy pathology books, open and closed, covered in arrows and underlines. I looked him in the eyes and gave him a kiss he wouldn't forget. Not one of those fly-like kisses he used to say I gave him. To forget the unpleasantness of living together, to banish bad times and thoughts of future arguments, there's nothing like sex. When men want that, there's no going back; the problem is when intellectual obstinacy takes hold and they lock themselves into unworkable constructs. Bernardo was one of them. I kissed him, and I didn't convince him. Then I gave up on the body, whose effectiveness was already being undermined by the disease, that strangely incomprehensible entity that he nevertheless insisted on understanding, reading, reasoning, and observing. But frustration was his cross, and I was the Christ nailed to it.
Then I began to explain everything to her. She must have understood, because I saw her eyes wandering between tenderness and hardness, confused by what lay before them: a woman they adored but could not penetrate. Like a god whose creatures rebel, and who sometimes would rather kill them than lose them.

I went to the address that was given to me on a crumpled piece of paper that someone picked up in the street.
"Miss, it fell out of your pocket," an older lady I passed on the sidewalk told me, placing the folded piece of paper in the palm of my hand and squeezing it with hers for just a moment.
It was a place in Villa Luro, and I'm writing all this now because the place no longer exists, and even less so those who were once in danger if its location

became known. A dead-end street next to the train tracks, a block from the level crossing near the Sarmiento station. I went down the iron stairs of the pedestrian bridge, through tall grass, cans, and bottles. The cobblestones led to the corner of Rivadavia. There I was, at seven in the evening, the sky already darkening, and the heavy traffic of the return to the province translated into honking horns.

It was a mattress workshop that opened its doors right on the corner, its walls white and moldy, covered with old political slogans and a few new obscenities. A broken tiled overhang uselessly covered the entrance, and a sign read: “La Sorpresa Mattress Shop” by Álvaro Libertella. I thought how fitting the surname was if that was where lovers of imprisoned freedom gathered in those times.

I tried to peer through the dark glass of the double wooden door, but the grime was on the inside, and all I could see was an old counter behind which were shelves. The shop must have been closed by now.

- Who are you looking for?

A boy who looked about ten years old asked me that.

"To some friends," I said.

Don Álvaro receives his friends for his card game on Friday nights, and today is Thursday, and you…

He looked me up and down, as if scrutinizing me from head to toe. He was a boy with an intelligent gaze, and every now and then he'd glance at the older boys smoking near the corner on the opposite sidewalk. Undoubtedly, they didn't let him hang out with them because of his age; one of them might even have been his older brother. And the distance to the avenue with its incessant traffic was yet another barrier, the main excuse justifying the time that remained before he could belong to that group that, perhaps, enjoyed the freedom and impunity to do as they pleased. However, the boy's gaze suggested to me that he was more aware of many things that the others couldn't perceive. Sometimes we adults treat children like dogs, circling around us, seemingly lost in their own world, but they see and hear, but they keep it all to themselves, and don't act until much later.

-I don't seem like one of the trick-playing friends, that's what you mean, and you're right.

He grabbed one of my hands and with the other pulled a key from his pocket, which he used to unlock the door. We entered the dimly lit shop. The counter was old, with box cutter marks in the wood and broken, dirty glass panels on the sides, behind which lay scraps of fabric and leather, rope, and cans of expired glue. On the shelves along the walls were samples of mattress fabrics and rusty springs. The smell of glue was strong, but it didn't bother me. It reminded me of the shoe store in Morón whose owner had been a school friend of my father, Renato, and which we used to visit when we went west to see Leticia. The smell of leather and glue lulled me into a tranquility that was far from what I should have been feeling at that moment. A dog barked outside, distracting me from my reverie, and then a man of average height, somewhat bald, with a stocky build and a short, light beard—somewhere between reddish-brown and ash-blond—appeared through a door by the shelves. He wore round glasses, and lifting them slightly, he looked at me carefully and said to the boy:

-Thank you Ignacio, go ahead.

-See you tomorrow, Don Álvaro.

He left and locked the door again.

-Work for me, I need small hands for the needles, you know.

He showed me his calloused hands, with thick knots at the joints.

-I understand. I was summoned…

He raised those same hands and said:

-None of that, Miss Taboada. You are a friend of Gloria, and you need no introductions or preambles.

He led me through the back door, and we entered a room filled with mattresses of all sizes and types, arranged in tall rows that reached almost to the ceiling. There was a smell of glue, yes, and the smell of leather, too, sometimes turpentine, sometimes kerosene. And in one of the aisles between the rows of mattresses, there were chairs arranged in a circle. We sat down in silence. I looked around; it was like being in a city where the blocks were made up of these mattresses like buildings of different heights, and the spaces between them were streets or avenues. We were in the middle of an avenue, perhaps, disrupting the nonexistent traffic as if on strike.

We heard a woman's footsteps, accompanied by a man's. His heels were a bit high, but not too high, and we heard the tapping of men's boots. Gloria and Teodoro appeared, greeted me, and sat down.
"Thank you for coming, Cecilia," she said.
-What I don't understand...
-I know there are a lot of things you don't understand , but you don't need to.
-No, no, that's fine, I understand that, but trusting me enough to give me this address...
"Don't worry, we have plenty of meeting places, and we never use one for more than a week, or sometimes even less. You already know Teodoro, and Álvaro is a longtime collaborator of the cause, brave and unscrupulous, I'd say."
The mattress maker must have felt flattered. He placed his hands on his knees, pulled aside the apron he was still wearing, and scratched his thigh all the way up.
"What I do, miss, is nothing compared to what Gloria does. I make things, you can imagine, I listen to confidences behind the counter, and that's about it, besides arguing with the neighbors about what I find in the mattresses, if you only knew..."
I imagined all that, what people were putting inside, like an old clandestine custom that came from Sicily.
- Are they all from the same group?
"Anarchists, you mean?" Teodoro asked me. "Not at all. Many of us think differently, and that's why we argue, and that's why we meet with those who are more like us. But there are socialists of the highest order, the most conservative kind, and fascists too, what can you do, and plenty of criminals and natural-born murderers who get in our way."
"Everyone is useful," Gloria said. "If they serve the same cause."
"Does the end justify the means?" I asked.
The three of them smiled and looked at me; they must have bet shortly before that I would ask that question, but I never found out who had won.
"Sometimes, Cecilia," she told me. "Like this time..."
- What's going to happen?

Gloria was about to speak when Teodoro touched her hand and stopped her. She looked at him and said to me:
"Teo doesn't want us to take any risks, but I've already explained to him that this is my decision, more personal than anything else. And the guarantees have been in place for some time: nothing will stop what needs to be done."
He said it with the certainty of a pronouncement, and it was to reassure the younger Scarfionne .
- So why tell me?
-So you can tell everyone when it's done. But tell someone in particular, and the decision to tell them beforehand, is yours.
My God, I thought. These two had dragged me into their lovers' quarrel, only this quarrel involved a whole immense circle around them, and they didn't seem to care much about who they were involving.
“Well, Gloria,” I said, gripping the handle of the purse still slung over my right shoulder, making it even more brittle than it already was. I felt small in that chair in the middle of a room crammed with mattresses, each one seemingly holding a dead person dreaming of being buried in a private cemetery. “I never believed in the journalist’s honesty, but I do believe in people’s. You’re using me for a personal fight…”
Gloria stood up, frightened, as if what I thought was the most important thing in her life.
"No, no!" he exclaimed, stopping. He glanced at Scarfionne, then at Libertella . He sat back down and regained the idiosyncrasies of his formal thinking.
"That's not exactly how I want you to see it. It'll help you keep your job, because I've already found out, of course. I want you to be of some use to me, that's right, you're absolutely right, but it'll also be very useful to you. Imagine the impact your story will have; you could choose any newspaper to publish it in, even abroad, of course."
I wanted everyone to know, like an explosion that would finally wake everyone up, tearing down the blind walls. And I thought to myself: what if they go after her because of me, what if they find her? Because it all sounded like the final act of a long Dostoevsky novel.

There was no further conversation; the rest had been unspoken. When I left, I found the same boy who had greeted me sitting on the curb. It was already dark, around ten o'clock at night, and the traffic was thinning out.
"And what are you still doing here?" I asked him.
-I'm waiting for the bus, miss.
- Where do you live?
-Over there in Constitución, but before that in other places, and we used to live in Belgrano.
I would have liked to ask him the reason for so many moves, but I partly imagined it.
- And do your parents let you take the bus alone?
-My dad works and gets home late.
- And what does he do?
"He's a doctor." And he pointed across the avenue, a block away, to where the old Saravia Clinic had stood, which had closed a couple of years earlier. I remembered the article we published. It was about embezzlement, malpractice, and deaths.
"What's your name ?" I asked, ready to leave because night was beginning to close in on me between the lights on the asphalt and the increasingly silent sidewalks. I longed to hear the sound of the train on the tracks, to rescue me.
-Ignacio.
- But you know your last name, right?
-Saravia, miss.
Getting up because the bus was arriving, and just before getting on, as if ashamed for almost forgetting it, he proudly uttered the phrase he must have heard many times in his dining room in the good old days, but which now sounded like an epitaph:
-Grandson of General Saravia.

3

When I got home it was two in the morning, and I felt terrible. The trip had taken me over two hours because I had to sit at the bus stop for almost forty minutes waiting for it to arrive, alone and freezing cold. I hadn't had a snack or dinner; I knew I must be hypoglycemic. I started trembling and touched my forehead. Bernardo must be at home, worried sick. I thought about going back to the shop and calling, but it was too late, and I felt ashamed of my weakness. As always, I didn't like asking for help if I could manage on my own. When the bus arrived, I got on and sat down, but I fell asleep, or maybe I fainted. The point is, I was sitting in the back seat, and the driver must have forgotten about me until we got to the Retiro bus terminal. I think I remember his voice talking to a colleague about work and about his wife and kids, then I woke up when the lights went out.

" Wait !" I shouted, startled, clutching my overcoat and craneing my neck against the cold. The lights came back on. The driver walked down the aisle and stood with his hands on his hips, looking annoyed. He must have wanted to get home after driving for twelve hours, and now I was delaying his return.

- What's wrong, ma'am?

"What's up, Nacho?" another person asked from the street.

-A drunk woman fell asleep. We need to call the cops.

Nacho, I thought. Ignacio, like the boy Saravia. Everything seemed like a centripetal circle leading to the same hell I felt myself falling into. I tried to get up, but I fell to my knees in front of the driver. He thought I was drunk, obviously, and I couldn't blame him. At least they wouldn't leave me alone, because I couldn't stand up on my own. The two of them carried me inside the house where they ate and changed shifts. There was a table with a mate gourd and a kettle that had to be carried back and forth twenty-four hours a day from the stovetop to that table littered with cigarette butts and the remains of abandoned sandwiches. They left me sitting down and didn't offer me anything. I wanted to explain my illness, but my voice came out nasal, like a drunk's. I grabbed an old sandwich, almost certainly from mid-afternoon, and devoured it, literally. The men laughed. The patrol car arrived, they put me in, and took me home after rummaging through my purse for my documents. I let them do it.

They dropped me off at the entrance to the Sarmiento building. The street was deserted and silent, and only a straggling cardboard collector was still rummaging through the trash. I rummaged through my purse for my key, but the police had made such a mess that I couldn't recognize my things anymore. I rang the doorbell, once, twice, three times. A light came on in the lobby, I saw the elevator arrive on the ground floor, and Bernardo came to open the door for me in his pajama pants and slippers, his torso bare with the black hair I liked to stroke at night. When the door opened, I slipped into unconsciousness.

I woke up in the hospital, in the same room as last time, with the same floor nurse, and the same doctor, of course, my Bernardo. The man who was both my savior and my judge. He was at the foot of the bed with a colleague—I think it was Cisneros; I'd seen him a couple of times at home. They looked at me like I was a lab specimen. They murmured something, or so it seemed to me. I was still numb, my brain heavy and languid at the same time. I was being fed with the glucose drip connected to my veins. The other man left, and Bernardo approached. The nurse smiled at him and left. I always suspected the nurses, never Bernardo, but this time I imagined the novel of my tragedy.

-Pretty young lady, isn't she?

He grabbed my hand and said:

-If you're jealous, it's because you're doing well, but…

-But nothing…she's beautiful and healthy, what are you waiting for to let this next corpse rot in peace?

His lab coat was immaculate, his tie slightly askew, and he had the perfect hands of the ideal doctor one imagines. But I knew him from home, his weaknesses, his tempers, his clumsiness, and the whole body I loved and that would outlive me. That's what I hated about him, and I started to cry.

The next afternoon, he sat beside me, put an arm around my shoulders, and lay down. He had locked the door. Someone—the nurse or the maid—tried to open it but soon gave up. He was going to tell me something; I knew it. My right foot was swollen, the red having turned to purple. I pulled back the sheet and looked at myself; he did the same. I saw him close his eyes and covered him with my blanket. That afternoon was hard to forget. Night fell,

and we were still in the same hospital bed: doctor and patient united in a timeless space, a shared space where we didn't argue, and love was no longer a stubborn and confusing matter, but a kind of limbo where there were no sins to atone for, because the body took care of that.

That night they didn't serve me dinner; I had to fast for the morning surgery. They were going to amputate my foot, or part of it, in what Bernardo called the Charcot operation. I wasn't alone; Cisneros, the anesthesiologist, was with me.

-Don't worry, Cecilia, she won't feel anything, she already knows.

I wanted to respond to that obvious statement with the most obscene insult I could imagine. Of course, I wouldn't feel a thing, just the phantom limb, the nonexistent itch, and all the chaotic mess the mind creates about the remaining body, fabricating an anatomy that doesn't exist. But I kept my mouth shut.

Then, suddenly, the door opened, and Soledad, the operating room nurse, came in. She was the same one who used to come to Ibáñez's house for dinner. They were a couple, I think. Mateo's wife had died, leaving him with a son who was always sick. Soledad inspired confidence in me with her bright smile, because she was incredibly blonde, with freckles so small you had to look closely, but which nevertheless formed a constellation on her cheeks and forehead. She hugged me, complimented my appearance, strengthened my spirit, banishing the dark lingering effects on the subdued faces of those men standing there, like executioners: one with a syringe and a mask in his hands (that's what I dreamed of), and the other with a saw and a hammer (to cut and reconstruct with splinters and glue a body that had been deteriorating for a long time). They were both petty, vain gods waiting their turn, patient because they possessed eternity—the eternity of men, the eternity of the healthy. And I repeated this long, incomprehensible word to myself as they watched me, listening to Soledad's torrent of words, which flowed like water, and like water vanished, leaving nothing but the dry surface of its meandering path.

When they left, I lay on my side, my head on the pillow and one hand under it. Then I heard a rustling of paper. It was from a prescription pad stolen from some office in the hospital, and the handwriting was undoubtedly a woman's,

messy but clear. The name Salustiano Saravia was written on it, and below it, a number that could have been either a medical record or a date. The figures on the next day's calendar matched them. Who could have put that paper under my pillow without me noticing? Soledad, surely, taking advantage of the distraction of the greetings and the conversation. So she was just another cog in the not-so-subtle web of politics. And Saravia was undoubtedly the General who had been talked about for some time as a sure candidate to assume the presidency the following year. Saravia, who lived in the western part of the city, in Parque Leloir to be precise, in a country house I had seen from the street when I went to Leticia's and we went for walks. But that surname sounded familiar; I'd heard it very recently, not in the newspapers or on television. And I remembered the boy from the mattress shop, who claimed to be General Saravia's grandson. I spent the next half hour making connections, and the more imaginative they were, the more likely they seemed. That was the name of the next attack, because that was precisely what the scoop Gloria was sharing with me was about. I had seen the resentment on the mattress maker's face when the plan was barely mentioned, and I had heard the whispering, a mixture of anger and anticipation in the voice of that short, stocky man who sewed and lifted mattresses with the same unhurried care and dedication, strength and delicacy, though the latter had begun to take its toll on his worn and crooked hands, which was why he had the boy to help him. And why had he hired a member of the family he undoubtedly despised? Was I supposed to save the general? I didn't really care about him. The boy was my priority, but reporting him would cause more deaths and disappearances than the one life I cared about saving. And I had no more certainty than the deductions of my own imagination.

I felt the need to write, and I would have done so even though that hadn't been Gloria's intention. I searched in the drawer of the bedside table. I moved aside the prescriptions, the used napkins, the cookie wrappers, and the jars of cream. I pressed the button to call the nurse, once, twice, three times. It was almost midnight.

"What do you want?" he asked as he entered, yawning.

I asked for paper to write on; I already had a pen. She gave me a strange, angry look. Was that why I bothered her? She brought it to me, just one sheet. I asked for more, but she didn't come back. I got up and went to the bathroom to get some napkins. Then I wrote frantically, like I couldn't remember ever doing before. At the newsroom, I was slow on my typewriter, getting distracted by conversations from the other desks. At home, I would sit down and get up every ten minutes to go find something or do something else, moments when my mind would create what I would later transcribe with my hands. But now that paper was scarce and time even more so, I wrote quickly, in small, very neat handwriting. There wouldn't be time for the typesetters to hesitate.

When I finished, I picked up the phone and dialed the outside number, then the newsroom number. Braulio should still be there. An old man's voice answered; it was the one who cleaned the offices at night.

-Eusebio, this is Cecilia, can you put me through to Braulio or whoever is in charge tonight?

A moment of silence in which I imagined him looking up and searching the desks.

-There's only the errand boy here, miss.

There was no point in arguing.

Tell him to come to the hospital where I'm staying; it's an urgent work matter. Please, Eusebio!

When I uttered those last three words, which sounded like a plea, I almost burst into tears.

-Okay, miss, don't worry, I'll tell you, I'll tell you…

And before he hung up, I heard him call the boy like an angry old man.

It was almost two in the morning when the same boy who had come to my house arrived. They hadn't let him in, and I had to insist they let him in when someone from reception called me to ask if I knew him. The lights came on in the hallway, two or three nurses woke up, and a security guard called another. When all that unnecessary commotion died down, the boy approached the bed, looking frightened. It was the same boy, and I realized I didn't know his name.

Tadeo Espinoza told me.

- Are you related to old Eusebio?
"He's my grandfather, miss, on my mother's side. You see, my grandparents were cousins and they got together, you know..."
I was impatient, but I'd heard something about a homicide in the countryside near General Lavalle, and a family settling of scores, they said. He realized it.
-They killed my old man.
There was no time, there is no time, I repeated to myself as if repetition were not the most unjustifiable waste of time.
- Take this to the editorial office and have them include it in the first edition.
I made sure my signature was perfectly clear so Beltrame wouldn't have any doubts. I was doing him a favor, after all. By announcing the upcoming attack, he'd curry favor with his friends in the government. The boy received the crumpled papers with an affected air that surprised me, no doubt used to the neatly typed, albeit cross-out and misspelled, official-size sheets he often took to the workshops. He replied with nothing more than "Yes, Miss Cecilia, don't worry," and ran off.
I laid my head on the pillow, more than tired, overwhelmed by nerves and despair. My body was abandoning me once again; my mind had always betrayed me. Only the words I had written filled me with pride, as if they were the gospel of my life. Faith placed in words that would soon be written on paper that in a few days would be used to light a barbecue fire. More superfluous than the meat, and even weaker than the fire itself, also doomed to go out.

In the morning I woke up right at the time they were supposed to take me to the operating room. I felt so vulnerable, surprised by what I considered a lapse in my care, that I realized they had given me something to make me sleep the night before, and yet I had overcome the chemical effects of the medication through sheer willpower, because that is no less the effort with which I tackled the article that had to be written. There was no one to blame; everything was already written, even what would happen that morning, and he, like me, was merely an instrument. The hands that caressed me would be the same ones that would cut. I had chosen him, just as he had accepted his role in the drama of our life together.

But first I wanted to know.

" Bring me the diary, please," I said, squeezing his hand.

Reluctantly, he brought it to me. I saw the headlines announcing the attack on General Saravia's house in the middle of the night. My fingers held the newspaper open on the sheet, and they began to tremble. Too late, I told myself, so late, I lamented. The bomb had exploded at four in the morning, at the exact moment the first edition was being printed, racing along the dizzying wheels of the rotary presses. By the time each copy was folded, tied, loaded onto delivery trucks, and scattered across the streets of Buenos Aires, the general's house had already been destroyed and its inhabitants dead. A man and his wife.

I frantically scanned each page, and there it was, my article, in the second column of page five, as unchanged as if the events recounted on the front page had never happened. Such a contradiction wouldn't go unnoticed, and it would be the trigger for a new explosion. Where was Beltrame now? What was he feeling? Gloria had masterfully pulled the strings of our lives. She had used me, but for what? What appeared to be revenge against Beltrame, with the double standards of her diary, with that double reality where one abolished the other, or perhaps both coexisted in another, larger reality: the fiction in which we all acted.

Thus, Bautista Bletrame had been exposed before the men he was trying to curry favor with, whatever his motives. What he had apparently allowed to be published early as an exposé—though he didn't know it because I had disregarded his authority, and the boy had taken the manuscript directly to the printer a few minutes before closing time, and the typists had done their work in the blindness of the dizzying routine—was the very thing he was announcing as a confirmed fact in large black letters on the front page. He must have been clutching his head in his hands, elbows on his office desk, weeping, perhaps with fury, or perhaps it was simply utter bitterness, the kind that defines our lives, that is sometimes a friend who burns us, yes, burns us, with her fiery hands.

He will wait for them to arrive. He won't use the gun in the desk drawer. He loves life too much to do so, or perhaps he's too afraid. He will speak as only he knows how, because his best weapon has always been words. And

then what will become of the first objective of Gloria's plan (not the political or social one, but the intimate plan to save the soul of the man she loves)? The redemption of Bautista Beltrame, which should come to him in the face of disaster, he will know how to turn to ash when he escapes the rubble that will become his diary.

I fell asleep with that thought, which transformed into a dream that also left me during the anesthesia. In the afternoon, as night was falling on the street, where the honking of horns from the avenue and the smell of diesel from the buses drifted in, I opened my eyes and found myself lying in bed, covered by the sheet. For a moment I thought it was dawn and that the day hadn't yet passed, and I had the vain hope that the newspaper hadn't yet hit the streets. However, it was nightfall. The light from the hallway came in with the nurse and her plaintive voice, but this time with a tone of compassion that made me feel more pity than she must have felt for me. That tone didn't suit her. How to tell her, I thought. My mind wandered over such things as I came out of the anesthesia. Then I saw Bernardo sitting in a corner of the room.

I uncovered myself to look at my feet.

One was gone, and yet I felt it. That beloved and hated fragment of my body, like every fragment of our bodies.

The next morning, what always happens in hospitals at that hour took place: the doctor's rounds, the changing of bandages, and the inevitable exchange of more or less comforting phrases. "Everything's fine, Cecilia, you'll be going home soon." And I left at the end of the week. The apartment on Sarmiento Street was clean, as if it had been on vacation. Bernardo had slept at the hospital all those days, and when we arrived, he opened the balcony door, made the bed, and helped me lie down. The crutch was leaned against the wall; from then on, it became my inseparable companion. At first, I hated it, then, like that rejected fragment of my body that was no longer there, I needed it like someone needs their soul.

Almost all my colleagues from the newsroom came to visit me. The offices and printing plant had been raided, and the newspaper shut down. Everyone on staff was taken to the police station. The article I had written was unsigned.

Who had omitted it during printing? I asked about Beltrame. Braulio and Mario exchanged a look of stupid complicity.
-He spent several days going back and forth between the police station and the government house. We thought he'd be the first to fall, but we don't know how he manages to stay afloat. He always seems to land on his feet.
"At our expense," said Mario.
Braulio, as always, came out to defend him.
"And what are you complaining about ? If we're free, maybe it's because he... I don't know, said something, convinced them. When I went to see him, the neighbor told me he took the car at noon yesterday and still hasn't returned."
"He went to look for her," I said, my eyes fixed on the balcony.
That was the second objective of Gloria's plan. First, Bautista's redemption (she had offered him her head, but he had placed it back on his shoulders). Beltrame had done nothing more than what he always did: survive and think of her. He would search for her wherever he went, and in that way, the others —the trackers and hunters—on the daytime or nighttime savanna of the concrete jungle, dirt, and excrement that is every suburban city in the Third World, would follow him, stalking him without his knowledge, or perhaps without his wanting to know, ignoring the part of his mind that knows everything we do is invariably observed. In that way, she became the sacrificial lamb.
The martyr, they would call her from then on, the symbol of resistance.
The boys stood silently around the bed, watching me, as the sun dipped behind the buildings, casting shadows into the apartment. Then it grew cold, and Braulio said:
-Well, Ceci, we're leaving.
They had left flowers and Bernardo filled the vase with water from the kitchen, and went back to put it on the dining room table.
"Thank you for visiting me," I said.
They left and we were alone. He sat on the bed, squeezing my hand tightly, watching the street die in the shadows and the people reborn like ghosts under the white mercury lights.
The next day, she went back to work. I was left alone, but I had the phone to help me. I asked for the morning paper, not "El Radar," of course, where I'd

had the privilege of writing in its last edition, like someone writing an epitaph for a friend. The doorman brought me "La Prensa." I flipped through the pages one by one, feeling a tingling in my operated leg, but I ignored it, because I read the news about the disappearance of one of the main opposition leaders. She had last been seen in a poor neighborhood in Lomas de Zamora, getting on a bus from which she was never seen getting off. Then I couldn't help but imagine Bautista Beltrame in his car, behind that bus, like a small parasite harboring the germs of death.

THE BLAME

1

From the third-floor balcony overlooking Sarmiento Street, I could see the imposing Abasto building.

The archways were like high domes beneath the city sky. The gray, cloudy winter Sundays held a silence at that height that bordered on the religious. My crutches, leaning against the wall, inevitably made me think of God, despite the doctrines my mother had tried to instill in me. I, however, couldn't tear out the Catholic roots that were always implicit in my father Tejada's words, and especially in the way he said things. We didn't go to church, we didn't pray, we didn't have crucifixes. It was simply that circle of fatalism in which Catholics stubbornly remain, like a zone of perpetual drama, yet of endearing familiarity. They wallow in tragedy, a pride from which they cannot escape. Even humiliation is vanity.

Thinking about this, one Sunday afternoon in July, after a frugal lunch, and alone because Bernardo had gone to the hospital for an extra shift, I watched the arches of the Abasto Market rising a few blocks away. It had been closed for a long time, and they said it was going to be remodeled, but its interior remained deserted, the doors boarded up, and the homeless sleeping on the sidewalks and in doorways. The church of the Abasto, as I decided to call it, was calling to me.

But why get out of bed, where my days had been spent since the newspaper closed? I found no solace in my writing, and when I did decide to write, it felt as automatic as it was monotonous. I wrote poems to break the routine. I'd take the sheet of paper from the typewriter, the one where I wrote a story or an article, and put in another where I crafted a poem that seemed like epitaphs for unknown dead. The breeze drifted in through the window overlooking the street, and the occasional stray car horn rang out, lending a touch of warmth, a domesticity, perhaps, to those poems. A shout from the neighbors, or the barking of the few dogs in the building as their owners

made their way down the hall to the elevator. We hadn't used that elevator when we moved in because it was only two floors up, but I couldn't do without it now. And rather than give in, or acknowledge my dismissive surrender to necessity, I tried to avoid using it by staying home.

That's why people came to visit me, and they rarely returned once my sour disposition scared them away. That was happening with Bernardo. The arguments were becoming more and more frequent, and because he didn't want to hurt me with the hurtful comments I heard despite everything, even in the silence of his lips, he would go to the hospital. What he didn't see, he told me many times, could be considered undone.

He was referring, obviously, to the visits of Leonardo González, one of my colleagues in the newsroom. He was a short, stocky Black Cuban man, with skin not ebony, but mottled brown. He was over forty when he joined the newspaper. He came from Brazil, and that's why he'd become Fabio Contreras's colleague. We'd chat in the office at night while waiting for a phone call to confirm a story, and it turned out he was a distant relative of mine. His original surname was Gonçalvez, but through dealing in the labyrinth of customs and government offices in both countries, with Paraguay in between, he ended up Hispanicizing it. We all knew he was a frequent user of all kinds of drugs, even Beltrame, but he was someone we couldn't afford to fire. González wrote well, but above all, he had a crucial understanding of Latin American politics, and that's why he and Contreras were in charge of international news. I often saw him smoking joints in the office, late at night, and sometimes I could smell him from the men's bathroom during the day. Since Contreras's death, he was always alone. I knew he was the one who gave Fabio the painkillers for the stomach aches that ultimately killed him. He sold marijuana or cocaine to people in the office, in the hallways, in the bathroom, or on the sidewalk. His product was passable, and sometimes very good when he received packages from outside. When he said on a Friday that he was traveling for the weekend, we knew what he meant.

Back then, I wasn't involved in that. I wasn't interested; I felt no affinity for the pleasure or the escape, or whatever it was, that those drugs instilled in others. I was the only female journalist in the newsroom, at least the only one they considered serious because of the topics I covered, and at that time they

kept me somewhat hidden, that is, overprotected and sidelined. There were also men whose temperaments couldn't be imagined falling into such indulgences, like Beltrame or Leandro, but they turned a blind eye.

Gonzalez proposed a business idea to help me cope with the lack of work after Radar closed down: publishing a current affairs magazine. He already had contacts in Uruguay and Chile for political articles (gentle, innocent, he insisted, because times were tough), and he would convince Dora Cifuentes to contribute her unpublished articles on feminism. I had told him that if he wanted to sell copies at that time, the magazine should focus on artists and television. He smiled, as if to say that one couldn't stray too far from principles, because without them, what are we, he asked me?

He would sit on the bed and we would talk, and when those things came up, I would look at my amputated foot and cry. Then Leonardo would offer me a joint, and one afternoon that same winter, I accepted. It wasn't the first time; I wasn't that prudish, but from then on it became a habit. Then we would both smoke, looking out the third-floor window, watching the afternoon fade, and when we saw Bernardo walking on the opposite sidewalk, ready to cross, he would say:

-It's time for me to go, Ceci.

We'd put out our joints in the ashtray, and he'd scatter the ashes on the balcony. We'd pass each other almost at the door, greeting each other with barely concealed ill humor. Bernardo would kiss me, inhaling the lingering scent even through the open window, and then close it because it was cold. The confinement bred resentment. Sometimes he'd reproach me, sometimes he'd fall into a brooding silence that hurt me more than the words I knew swirled in his mind, lost in a labyrinth of anger and sorrow. He was an admirably methodical man, yet on many occasions he allowed himself liberties I least expected. His good humor, his affability, his exaggerated honesty were some of the virtues that surfaced without him even thinking about it, but precisely when he caught a glimpse of himself in a casual mirror, like a veiled smile or an uncertain comment from someone else, he'd retreat back into his seriousness. I had known him for ten years, I loved him and missed him when he wasn't with me. I adored his hands and his hair, the hair on his body and the sound of his voice, a scent and sound mingled in a symbiosis of mints and

Jockey Club. Because he smoked too, secretly, of course. In the hospital parking lot or on the building's terrace. When Ibáñez came to visit him, he would tell me:
"Let's go out to the terrace, Ceci." Then Mateo would wink at me, and I would smile, because that break freed Bernardo from my burden. That's what I was, a weight he felt tied to: taking care of me wasn't solely out of love, because of course that was part of it, but there was also this sense of responsibility that weighed him down, which I could see in his body when he lay down next to me, and which I could still see as a hunchback on his back when he came through the door of the apartment on his way to or from the hospital. A weight that wasted him away.
I knew it was guilt, uncertain, anonymous, and manifold. Nameless and yet bearing every name at once.

2

You see, Ceci. Great men, or those who think they are great, also make mistakes, and when they fall, they cause a crash greater than a cataclysm, because they drag everyone around them down with them. They acknowledge their guilt with unthinkable verbal circumlocutions, with elegant rhetoric filled with nightmares for those who listen. And all to disguise the impotence that has already overwhelmed them.
That's what happened to my father, Ceci. The great Dr. Adalberto Ruiz called me no more than two weeks ago. He hadn't spoken to me since I left our town, General Lavalle. He kicked me out because he didn't like my friends, but mostly because they weren't as good a doctor as he was. Back in town, I couldn't work alongside him; I felt intimidated and watched. If he gave me his patients, at first he'd come with me on every visit, and while he talked and laughed with the patient or their family, whom he'd known all his life, I would

listen to their heart and lungs, take their blood pressure, examine their eyes and tongue, and palpate their body, sitting on the bed, in silence, because that's what's appropriate for the living dead. The patient, a dying old man or a terminally ill child, and I, we were both puppets who came to life when my father decided. Then he'd clap his hands and boom his voice, which sounded like it would bring down the ranch's wooden roof or adobe walls. Then we'd go out into the open countryside, or walk through the mud or the winter pasture, and mount our mares for the next visit. He'd lecture me with his advice and reprimands, but first there had been a disapproving silence, which would break like lightning in the clear sky. "Damn it!" he'd say, "You idiot! Didn't you realize that kid's faking it? His father wants to take a few days off from Don Braulio's work and is making them say the kid's sick. Those ranch hands are all the same. And they'll screw you over right away. If you don't wise up , Bernardo..."

And it was always like that, ever since I was a boy. I became a doctor because he was, and back then I admired him. His presence: the beret tilted to one side, the neat, slightly curled, thick beard, dark as a raven's wing, the aquiline nose, the sturdy body in his riding gear and the babouches, the boots he wore constantly and on every occasion, from morning till night. When he took them off, for me, as a child, it was as if he were taking off his feet... Yes, laugh all you want, Ceci, but I even went so far as to sneak into my parents' room in the middle of the night to peek inside his boots. When I saw him get up, half-naked and barefoot, I hid in a corner of the bathroom. He went in and started to urinate. I saw his strong, manly body, the one I didn't have, and I resolved to be like him. How many times, later, as a teenager, did I stand in front of the mirror trying to strike a pose and imitate his boastful gesture. But you know how I am; my body is scrawny, almost as thin as my mother's. I did inherit my hair, though, from my father, his face, his nose, and also his frustration. Because these days I've learned that all his boasting was nothing more than the unyielding despair of the looming impotence he felt his whole life. The pain, perhaps, of the people he saw dying? He's a great doctor, I know. His wisdom began in books and continued with experience. The countryside is a great teacher, rustic, elemental, so simple it's almost pitiful at times, but its roughness hides a kindness, though it saves it for the nights,

concealing what it knows until it's necessary to act. And then it cuts and opens the meat as if it were a cow. I saw my old man set broken bones that protruded through the skin, stitch up a wound with butcher's twine when there was no other, drain tumors teeming with decay. All this amidst the pain, demanding that the patient endure it, and the screams justified his actions, because they somehow masked the certainty of doubt and the guilt of what he was doing. I saw him furrow his brow and forehead as he performed these feats in the middle of a poor shack, on a torn mattress. There was a glint in his eyes, and I even thought I saw a certain malice.

Because that's what doctors are, Ceci. A hybrid of sensitivity, intuition, art, knowledge, anger, guilt, vanity, and the inevitable touch of malice. Do we enjoy other people's pain? No, of course not, you'll say! We do what's necessary, and pain is one of those necessary things. But you feel the power in those moments, believe me . Or maybe you've already figured it out, if I think about who I'm talking to. Poor thing, my love. My precious and talented Cecilia…

I became a doctor because there had been doctors in my family for three generations. My father said his grandfather was the illegitimate son of a doctor who was persecuted for political reasons. They say he was shot and buried in an unmarked grave near Santa Fe. He was an eminent doctor, trained at La Salpêtrière . He knew everything: anatomy, neuroscience, clinical medicine, and surgery. I wanted to be like them and like I imagined my father to be, that kind of god on horseback who would appear from the bushes, always late, as befitted the figure he represented, to bring down a fever, prescribe some herbs, give an injection, or amputate a leg. Blood always accompanied him as he left the hospital, as befits a good doctor.

I had to leave. But I said before that he kicked me out, right? The truth is, I don't remember anymore, and this forgetfulness is just one more twist and turn in the labyrinth I live in. It's a city like La Plata, my mind, I mean. That's why I went there. There are things and places, there are people, that call to us, because they're already inside us. My mind has always been very methodical, forming increasingly intricate geometric plans, which logic tries to justify by drawing lines that constitute the theorem of our lives. And who understands it? Even God gets confused and contradicts himself. But isn't

contradiction the very essence of things? Isn't chaos, perhaps, the rational explanation of the irrational?

The ambivalence of doctors is seen only by a few of the initiated. The sick person who comes to us is so overwhelmed by pain that they cannot see beyond it, and the healthy person is too preoccupied with their health to be interested in anything else. We live on two planes, so to speak. Two floors of a house that are subdivided horizontally into multiple rooms. We change rooms day and night; we are taken there, or we move. We decide to be in one, and suddenly in another, from cold to heat, from wind to drought, from the smell of a corpse to the smell of ether. A door may have a scalpel in the handle, and the floor may be littered with stray needles. And the water we drink always tastes like syrup.

You'll say I'm playing the victim, I know. Vanity, this damned vanity that envelops that other, more pressing, incomprehensible feeling that never fades or dies. Vanity changes its face with the times because it's made of flimsy, low-quality material, a plastic whose lifespan is proportional to the consistency of the water-based paste from which it was molded. But the stone at the bottom doesn't disappear. It's in the well of my eyes, I know you've noticed, I see it in your expression when you look at me at night, when I think you pity me. I don't want to admit that this pity makes me vain, because vanity is founded on those firm pedestals that resemble compassion, even when it tries to adorn them with trimmings that are nothing more than makeup. The truth is, it can't grow on other foundations because it's too big and too light . She needs a lot of space, as much as she claims for herself and takes without permission, but any wind could carry her away without much effort, and that is why she must be settled, and tied, to the stone of guilt.

That shame, Ceci, that my father taught me.

My father went to church every Sunday. I don't know if he believed in God, but he went with us to the village mass at seven in the evening in the summer and six in the winter. Sometimes he arrived late, other times he left early, always due to the demands of his job. An accident in the river, a blow to the leg with an axe, or an imminent birth. But when he stayed, he sang the hymns in his baritone voice, and even when I was grown, he would hold my hand, fulfilling his duty to God. He wore his Sunday best, a neckerchief, and the

wide-brimmed hat he only wore once a week for a ride. He even changed his horse. On Sundays, he would leave Judith, the mare who knew all the daily routes, for the gray and white colt he himself had brought forth three years earlier in a wasteland that no longer existed, because back then the mother's hooves were buried in the mud from the flood. He told me how he performed the cesarean section on the mare and then slaughtered her. And the colt was his from then on, and he named him Job because he reserved him for pleasure and for Mass.
You laugh at our contradictions, we Ruiz family. We should call ourselves the believing doctors. Judith, the avenger, the cruel woman willing to slaughter others to save her people. Job, the man of the impossible, always wanting and yielding.
That was the horse that killed my mother, if it wasn't me.

Bernardo had just returned from the hospital that Sunday when he ran into González. He was in a bad mood. He went into the bathroom; I heard the toilet flush, which always malfunctioned, and his grumbling. Then the lid slammed shut, almost like a gunshot. What usually made us laugh was now an insult. He came back into the room, in long underwear, barefoot, and shirtless. He smelled of sweat. He lay down on the bed next to me. My foot, operated on a few months earlier, was once again oozing odor, and the bandage, no matter how often I changed it, got dirty every day. We made love like that, without the smell of our bodies bothering us; that, I think, was precisely what united us: the familiarity of our illnesses. My physical one, chronic, suffocating, overwhelming, and exhausting, was mine. His was the mind, or spirit, if you will, unhinged, overwhelming, contradictory, confused, complexly constructed and deconstructed at every moment of the day.
We comforted each other after attacking each other with words and looks.
- Is that guy related to you?
He asked seriously, trying to feign what he couldn't, with poorly veiled irony. I glanced at him sideways; his gaze was fixed on the ceiling, his beard three or more days' growth, his hands crossed on his chest, like a dead man with his eyes open.

"Like I said, I think he's a second or third cousin, based on what we gathered from remembering the families. Believe it or not, his mother was white with blue eyes."
-He takes after his father, you can see…
That's when he started talking. Sometimes he would sit on the bed, his back to me, to hide his face and his gaze; other times, he would sit cross-legged and talk to me with gentle smiles as he recalled the good and the bad, especially when he thought of his mother. He would stroke my face, call me "poor thing," even though I hated that term. But I couldn't, and didn't want to, stop him: these outbursts were so infrequent that it was like trying to stop a train bearing down on us.

You see, Ceci, how I jump from one topic to another. I haven't even finished telling you why my father called me. He hasn't spoken to me in years, not since I moved to La Plata. And then, when I came to Buenos Aires and built a career for myself, knowing that my old doctor friends who knew him must have told him about me, I still didn't hear from him. It's true that I didn't go back or call him either. What for? We're two rare specimens of an extinct species: those who don't forgive. Because the fury and violence of these times doesn't stem from an inability to forgive, but from frustration. Those who forget don't necessarily forgive; something else simply occupies their minds. Because let's be honest, humanity isn't as sentimental as we think; it uses its brain in asynchronous acts of remembering and forgetting. They say that if there's no memory, there's no guilt—I think I read that in a story by Beltrame. It's a good theory, convenient, of course, especially for people like him, but that doesn't make it any less interesting, if not valuable for survival. Because that's what these bodies and these damn testicles are for. Sorry, Ceci, for the outburst, but I'm getting carried away. No, I didn't take anything before coming here, and don't think the joint smoke you and Gonçalvez left in the air had any effect on me (notice I'm calling him by his real last name, because I respect you, Ceci, because I love and admire your mind as much as I loathe my own, because reading and learning are useless to me if they don't allow me persistence: non-death).

My mother rode horses, of course, and she taught me before my father took me with him on his visits. We rode every Saturday from the time I was seven. Not on a pony, but on a colt that had been born almost the same year as me. It was meant for me, because it was Job, the one I already told you about. I rode him on Saturdays, and my father on Sundays. We shared the colt as if we shared a mare: we never crossed paths or even saw each other, and that was the only thing he didn't dare criticize me for, because my mother had taught me. Like two males in heat, we shared the same horse on weekends. And that, I think, is what turned him against me, when I became a man, that is, when I was a teenager who masturbated all the time, always alone, but anywhere—house, field, or river. And when he took me to the village whorehouse, he stood watching me from a chair by the bed, to protect me, he said, to prevent the whore from taking advantage of me or giving me a disease.

It was memorable, Ceci, that night. The whore was a real whore, of course, and she knew exactly what she was doing (am I delirious? Who knows?). When I finished, I looked at my old man's face, and when I glimpsed his approval, my soul plunged into the highest and deepest ecstasy I had ever felt up to that day in my life, that night in the brothel of the big town, in a smelly room, with candles and sweat soaking the mattress and the dirty sheets.

I don't remember exactly how old I was, but long before that I rode with my mother, side by side. She had a head start on me with her old mare, because Job was slow in certain ways, submissive, almost guilty. Perhaps it was his birth? Animals know that; they sense they shouldn't have been born for anything but death. The time he lived must have seemed like an undeserved gift, or worse: a mistake of nature. My father had interfered, because every doctor is a meddler in the natural course of things. Isn't medicine a knowledge invented by humankind? Isn't it about breaking the cycle of beings, including what we call germs? Isn't illness also another form of life? What is health? The supposed balance?

Hence the guilt we feel: we have created an artifice: life within death. From the moment we fall ill, we succumb; the rest is extra time worth little, as valuable as a wooden bridge over turbulent waters. And because we know this, we bear double the responsibility. The life we have extended is our responsibility, and every drop of poison that affects it is our fault.

The day I turned fifteen was a Friday, and I spent the night at the brothel. In the morning, I got up sleepily at six and went home to sleep. But it was Saturday, and I was supposed to ride with my mother. The Black woman who worked with us came to wake me up. She'd known me since I was born, and she didn't mind coming to undress me, even though I was a man now and naked.

"His mother is waiting for him," she said angrily.

I woke up shivering, with sores on my back and a bulging penis. You laugh, but that's what happens to us without thinking. I covered myself again, but I knew I had no choice; in fact, I didn't want to ask permission to leave. Because my father's demands were balanced by my mother's indulgence, and I didn't want to feel guilty for that abuse of her love. I misunderstood, of course, my mother's love or anyone else's. But when the strange sensation of that entity that grows and grows spreads its roots, it abhors everything else and destroys it. What one does out of guilt is as arbitrary, incongruous, and contradictory as the very essence of guilt: wallowing in the rotten mud because it's warm and because it's ours.

I got up, dressed, put on my riding boots, and went out. Job was waiting for me, calm, by the old mare. Mama was riding her and looking at me mockingly. We set off toward the path of the new field, full of pastureland that my father had bought at auction a year before. He didn't take care of it or spend any time on it. From time to time, vagrants and farmhands from other ranches would occupy it. They would build shacks that they would destroy when they left. She and I were trotting side by side.

"Did you like the gift?" he asked me.

The morning before, she had brought a heavy package wrapped in brown paper to my room. It contained the four original volumes of Testut, in French. She knew that if I were to become a doctor, only anatomy would be able to attract me like a body in heat.

"I already told you yes," I replied, grumpily. My eyes were tired and blinded by the midday sun, and my testicles ached against Job's back.

I felt ashamed of my reply, but I wasn't intimidated; instead, I grew bolder. We men often call courage whatever serves as an excuse to run away. I gathered my strength and robbed Job, who began to run.

I heard my mother calling. I ignored her. Suddenly, I saw a flash that eclipsed the sun, and between them, a shadow formed in which I could see the barbed wire. It wasn't the first time someone had tried to seize part of the land. I managed to change course in time; Job was young and strong, and just as he was calm, he knew how to spot dangers early on.

But Mom came riding up behind, spurring the old mare on, thinking something had happened to me. When I'd already moved away from the fence and Job was slowly coming to a halt, the two of them were running toward the wire. I couldn't shout or warn her, I couldn't stop her, who knows why. I was young, I could have jumped, run, gotten in her way even at the cost of injury or whatever. Yet I just stood there watching my mother, terrified, her riding breeches hanging low on her wide hips, her body covered by a white shirt that showed a glimpse of her sweaty bodice, and her helmet revealing her long, ash-blond hair.

The mare, whose name was Cleo, tried to jump when it was too late to stop. Her two front legs became entangled in the wire. She struggled to avoid falling, and became even more entangled. I watched as the loose, incomplete fence formed crowns of thorns around the mare. Then I saw my mother clutching her leg. The wire tightened around her as the animal struggled to free herself, and the barbs dug deeper into both of them. My mother's boot was stuck in the stirrup, and she couldn't get away because of the wire. The animal fell sideways, onto the leg my mother had been holding free until that moment. The barbs pierced her skin and made her bleed.

I saw them lying on the field, Mama with one leg and one arm under the mare, the other caught in the wire. The animal was whinnying in a kind of whinny I had never heard before. I ran, but I didn't dare do anything for fear of hurting Mama more.

" Kill her !" she yelled at me, crying in pain.

What was I supposed to do, Ceci? There I was, all alone, a useless boy good for nothing but sleeping with prostitutes.

What would I do in the face of death, you mean ?

I went to find the farmhands; they had found my father. My mother lay dying for a week. My father refused to take her to a hospital. Her legs were gangrenous, and her right arm was broken in several infected bones. She

finally died the following Saturday, exactly one week later, also at noon. If she had lived, they would have had to amputate her broken limbs. My father knew that very well. All week I devoured anatomy books as if they were Pandora's boxes, searching for answers, but I only found facts. That's what anatomy is: the unchanging reality that is revealed little by little, and that's why it deceives and fascinates us. Its surprises soon lose their novelty, because underneath lies the rust of antiquity.
My father was the one who cut the wires that day, with the large pliers our foreman brought him. He had given Mom a painkiller, which made her fall asleep. He handed me the revolver he always carried on his belt for protection against snakes or whatever, and ordered me to put Cleo down.
I looked at him for a few seconds, but his face was filled with too much fury for me to challenge him with my indecision. I fired twice, then twice more, until he snatched the gun from me and told me to help them lift the animal.
The farmhands and I separated the mare and loaded Mom into the back of the truck. I saw her crushed leg, the other one skinned by the wire, her broken arm. I watched as my father and the nurse who was helping him undressed her in her bedroom, cleaned her up, started an IV, and set her fractures.
Doctors came from Buenos Aires; I don't know if Dad called them or not. Dad was a member of the Academy of Medicine, and his articles on rural medicine occasionally appeared. They respected him, I think, but they resented him. He was too arrogant.
When Mom died, she called me into the room that served as her office and library. The anatomy books Mom had given me were piled on her desk, casting shadows on her face.
-I'll give them back to you when you prove to me that you deserve to be a doctor.

"And did he give them back?" I asked, stroking him to comfort him. His mind was freeing itself, distorted like his speech.
-Never, not even when I got my diploma and my doctorate. That's how I became certain that she never forgave me for my mother's death.
-Maybe he couldn't forgive himself, Bernie.

"Don't engage in superficial psychology, Ceci, you're worth more than that. Your silences speak louder, your written words are more subtle than those of Freud or Lacan fanatics. Why does he do what he does or say what he says? The explanation lies in the dissociation of all his cells, in the deconstruction of his molecules, or perhaps simply in the work of a saw on one of his bones."
I didn't know whether to laugh or cry; the way he said it was so hurtful that I couldn't tell if I saw an angel or a demon in his face. He was simply a man, and his, like mine, were two bodies confined by the boundaries of emptiness.
On Sunday nights, boredom reigns supreme. The longing for the eternity of the hours is embedded in the foundations of Monday, which we approach as if it were the walls of a concentration camp. And since we grow accustomed to everything, the extermination camp no longer seems so terrifying. But on Sunday nights, that certainty is still a newborn child, without a personality and very ill. That's why Bernardo told me:
-Let's go out for pizza.
I frowned; I didn't like going out for walks anymore. I hated the crutches, even though he had insisted I wear the orthopedic shoe, which gave me blisters and new infections.
"Okay," I said, because this was a different kind of Sunday. I grabbed my crutches, we went down in the elevator, and walked a block to Corrientes. There was a pizzeria on the corner. Checkered tile floors, a pool table in the back, tables with uneven legs, old oilcloth tablecloths, thick glass tumblers, and the usual soccer pictures and pennants on the walls.
A mozzarella pizza and a beer, empanadas for an appetizer, and flan with cream for dessert. And a coffee, for him. A sad Sunday, but a fertile sadness. How is that? Bernardo's loquacity, confessing after so long of hitting us with foul language, made that neighborhood pizzeria a recovered Paradise.
With my elbows on the table, a bottle of beer in one hand and a slice of pizza in the other, I asked him, looking over his shoulders at the panorama of the night street, the bus passing by, the empty taxis and a bum with his cart and his dog on the sidewalk.
- And why did he call you?
"A neighbor from town is sick. Dad says he hasn't been able to get a diagnosis. He wants to bring him to Rivadavia Hospital for tests. And the

strangest thing of all is... My God, I couldn't believe it when I heard him on the phone." Bernardo smiled sarcastically, rubbing his face as if waking from a dream. "He not only asked me for help, but he asked for my advice, can you believe it? I know you don't understand , you can't understand because your father is so different, but you'll get to know him soon enough."

- When does it arrive?

-Tonight.

I dropped the pizza and looked at him as if he were telling me a joke.

" Forgive me , Ceci, but he only called me this afternoon at the hospital to confirm that he was already coming with the patient on the bus that arrives in Retiro tomorrow morning. We admitted him and then we came home."

-Okay, Bernie. I understand, of course we need to air out the extra mattress and find some sheets and blankets.

"Don't worry about that. My dad isn't demanding except when it comes to his profession and me, and he adapts to anything. But I'm asking you a very special favor..."

-Tell me.

"I don't want the three of us to be alone tomorrow, I mean... I'd feel overwhelmed... I don't know if you understand ... it's just that I already feel suffocated thinking about what she's going to say, about her expression when she sees the apartment..."

-And when they saw me.

I wasn't fair to him, I admit it. If for a moment I sensed a hint of shame on his part, my self-loathing certainly amplified that feeling.

- What are you saying ?

-Nothing, forgive me. Do you want me to invite Dad?

He nodded. He looked like a helpless boy, ashamed and on the verge of tears. I took his hands, full of veins that stood out against his skin, his fingers long and his nails almost immaculate.

We ordered an extra fainá and stayed until closing time. At midnight, we walked arm in arm, slowly crossing the nearly deserted avenue, the traffic lights changing for a single car, or perhaps for a dog that followed us to the building, keeping pace with my crutches. When we closed the elevator door,

we saw him watching us from the sidewalk, his gaze fixed upwards as if he were witnessing the ascension of two disabled gods.

I met my father-in-law at dinner on Monday. He was a down-to-earth man, a little over seventy, sturdy and tall. He arrived wearing boots that seemed out of place in the city, but with a dark suit, a bow tie fastened with a silver charm, a fine leather belt, and a woven shawl draped over his left shoulder. When he took off his beret, I saw his thick, gray hair. He was carrying a large package, which he placed on the table as soon as he came in, and he hugged me for a long time, speaking affectionately in a very loud voice. For a moment, I thought I might faint in his arms. He had the same scent as his son, but a stronger body. What Bernardo had possessed of tenderness, his father overflowed with brusqueness.
-I'm glad to finally meet you, sir…
- What sir? Call me Beto, like my late wife used to.
Even in the first sentence uttered in his son's apartment, resentment was evident, because that comment, seemingly random and born from the depths of the old man's heart, was nothing less than that.
He had brought a cooked kid goat, which only needed to be heated. It would last us the whole week. Bernardo took it to the kitchen and started preparing what was needed. He slipped away, of course. The old man and I sat down on the sofa. He looked around, and I sensed behind his complacency a hostile disapproval that he was, I must admit, trying hard to hide.
- And what are you writing, my dear?
-I write for myself, nothing more. At the moment I'm unemployed, but a friend and I have some publishing projects.
-I think it's wonderful. Women writers are exceptional; my Ada read a lot and corresponded with many people from abroad.
I ignored the sarcasm.
-I didn't know her name was Ada, I mean... you know what I mean?
- Didn't Bernardo ever tell you his mother's name? Good grief! I thought that after all these years... but honestly, it doesn't surprise me.

The old man was staring at the kitchen door, his gaze unwavering. I turned around. Bernardo was leaning against the doorframe, his hands curled into a ball, his eyes vacant.
Suddenly, the old man raised his voice:
"You're not going to believe this, I bet. We told this story every chance we got, until we were sick of repeating it. My late wife and I met at the Larriere ranch —one of their sons is the one I brought to Buenos Aires. I had just graduated and they were my clients, nothing serious back then, but they always had digestive problems and other ailments, especially the men in the family. It turns out Ada was a governess, educated in London, didn't you know? So she taught everything at the rural school, which the Larriere family maintained at their own expense, of course."
-So they were philanthropists…
He looked at me, gauging his opponent's measurements.
"You can call them that, but they've always been outside of any political interests. They have other things to think about, their chronic illnesses that have given me a lot of headaches."
The old man hadn't stopped glancing at my leg and my bandaged foot covered by the shoe, as well as at the crutches.
-Like this time, right?
"That's right, Cecilia. But let's not talk about illnesses today, please. Bernardo!" she called, or shouted.
But then the doorbell rang. Finally, I thought, Papa Renato had arrived.
The old man got up to open the door.
-With your permission, Cecilia.
Dad came in carrying two bottles of wine, wearing the blazer he wore to school, his round glasses perched on his frail face. They shook hands.
"It's an honor to meet you, doctor," he said.
"The honor is all mine, Professor. I was just telling your daughter that my wife is an English and French teacher..."
They walked together to the sofa and sat down. Bernardo, like a servant, silent and angry, grabbed the bottles and took them to the kitchen. The aroma of the roast meat wafted beautifully playfully into the hostile atmosphere of the living room.

He taught the children everything as they grew up, Natalia and Vicente. They were always excellent children, obedient and cultured. A bit too delicate for my taste, so...
"You wouldn't let me visit them... they were too much for me, or maybe too little for what you wanted from me, it seems to me," said Bernardo as he returned with the wine glasses for the four of them and a lavish spread on the wooden tray.
"I wanted you to be tough, strong, to be a doctor. The Larriere boys were and still are delicate; the only strong one is Natalia, but Vicente is an effeminate boy whom I feel very sorry for..."
-That's right, Dad, do you understand, Ceci?
He raised his glass to offer a toast. Renato interrupted him, trying to mend what had been fracturing for a long time. Bernardo was finally reacting after a long period of silence, and he had chosen this particular night.
"That's just how parents are, Bernie, don't get so worked up. We make mistakes most of the time. Here's to hoping we don't make them for the rest of our time, and may it be a long time."
We toasted, of course, and after a long honking of the horn under the balcony and the sound of two bumpers colliding, the old doctor said:
"I agree with you, Renato, your words are very wise. But these kids don't understand yet; they'll know when they have children of their own."
I should have thought Bernardo hadn't said anything to me, and he didn't really have to. It was just the old man's brashness and his uncanny ability to measure his ill will, like perhaps he couldn't measure the correct dose of anesthesia to prevent a patient's pain. Pain is cured with pain, I suddenly thought, and I was surprised by the look on everyone's faces, because I hadn't realized I 'd said it out loud.
-I see you understand, my dear. It's a folksy saying, but very true.
When the others expected me to cry, I had answered as perhaps Ada would have. Bernardo covered his face with his hands, and the old man hid behind the glass of the goblet. Renato looked at me with pity, a fist in his coat pocket, and said:
- When do we eat in this house? I'm starving.

After coffee, my father-in-law and my father went out onto the balcony to smoke. I sat down on the sofa next to Bernardo, forcing him to stay with me. He wanted to get up, clear the table, wash the dishes—anything to avoid thinking about or listening to what his father was saying on the balcony, loudly and probably without realizing it, accustomed as he was to the vast expanses of the countryside and his own estate. But resentment was a tumor growing in the apartment, suffocating all four of us.

- And what do you think of this couple, sir?

We heard the old man's voice, which, though he tried to muffle it, was as clear as a gunshot. The smell of tobacco enveloped the edge of his words like ancient silks.

"I think they're perfect for each other," Renato replied.

"That's what I'm afraid of. Complementary couples seem suitable at first glance, they fit together like two pieces of a puzzle used in mental hospitals. But I prefer well-matched couples, like in our times. A doctor's wife should be a partner who doesn't confuse or get in the way, who sees the everyday and also understands what worries us."

"You're asking for too much, doctor. They have their own problems; they're just as confused as we are."

My Ada was a very cultured woman; she had her opinions, but she never contradicted me. She knew what her duty was.

- Your duty?

-As a wife, I mean.

"Yes, yes, I understand. A kind of priesthood, or a military regime. Due obedience or consecration to Christ. Everything perfect on the marriage certificate, or in the cohabitation agreement, like our children, it doesn't matter, the commitment is the same. But let me tell you something. My wife, Ceci's mother, is at home. You might wonder why she didn't come. She has Alzheimer's, doctor, she's been in a wheelchair for two years. She was a left-wing activist, a Marxist-Leninist, if you will. Her voice and her reasoning resonated in the street and at home as if in a temple. The strength she had, the intelligence that you can still sometimes see in her eyes. She doesn't recognize me, and Cecilia doesn't come to see her anymore because it makes her suffer. I'm torn between the two of them, one almost dead, the other

dying. What do you say to me now? What is the role of our women in marriage? I only have time to ask myself what mine is."
While I was crying silently, Bernardo said:
-I'm going to take the bones to the dog on the corner.
He got up and gathered the remains into a bag.

You see, Ceci. I keep telling you things in the same boring, disorganized way. But now that I think about it, isn't that a contradiction? Disorganization disrupts the routine that boredom causes, and yet, my disorganization has become a habit, and like all habits, it leads to boredom. I don't know how to tell stories like you, in a literary style. I only write well when I'm engaged in scientific work, and that happens because the methodological structure serves as my skeleton and protection. Like a beetle, perhaps. A seemingly strong cartilaginous skeleton, but far too fragile. A man's footstep destroys it, the footstep of a monster. That's what we are: beasts that destroy theories. Man is a predatory animal; I don't remember who said that. If he were to limit himself to destroying theories, which are nothing more than hypotheses, in that destruction the seed of construction would be bred. But when it destroys beauty, like a poem, that incomprehensible synthesis of body and spirit that humanity has managed to slowly, painstakingly, and cruelly forge over the centuries, even at the cost of its own tranquility. Because the tranquility of ignorance and laziness is a peace always threatened by inner volcanoes. We are body (that's why we are earth), bones (and rocks surprise us with their fragility), blood (the red lava that cools and leaves indelible stains, that cannot be returned to its container, that is lost, and with it what we call life, and we don't really know what it is).
That's why we don't understand the illness, and my father, who has always boasted of his practicality in solving problems, has now been confronted with what he doesn't understand. A has become B, and B has suddenly reversed into a deceptive W, or perhaps an 8? Confusing the terms so pitifully attached. You can't mix apples and oranges without impunity. Atomic theories don't match the surgeon's scalpel. Sometimes it's easier to mistake a spastic child for a dead bird on the sidewalk.

On Monday we went to the hospital. I saw my father walking deliberately slowly through the old, peeling corridors, passing nurses who glanced at him and smiled mockingly at the sight of him dressed like an elegant gaucho, or perhaps a doctor in disguise. The younger colleagues greeted him respectfully when I introduced him. Mateo first, since we found him at the entrance, but he didn't give us much time because his son was admitted again. Then we arrived at Vicente Larriere's room. He was awake, naked under the sheet. His chest was thin, as were his face, legs, and arms, but his belly was a large bulge, which, even if it sounds foolish, looked very much like a pregnant woman's. My father looked at me while I felt Vicente's abdomen. He's a kind man, somewhat shy, or rather reserved. He's just over thirty, and his only family is his father and sister. His mother died in France when the children were teenagers, or so I was told. After that loss, the relationship that had practically never existed between them and me became impossible, because they were constantly traveling back and forth to Europe. Vicente was studying agronomy in Amsterdam and Natalia at the Paris Conservatory with Bolanger and Ansermet .

"How are you feeling today?" Dad asked him, in his folksy way, which made the residents who came in shortly after laugh. Dad ignored them, just as he ignored the complaints of the old women who hovered around the patients' beds with their herbs, or the children who jumped around, or the dogs that barked. That peculiarity of his character is admirable, and ultimately, it's a gift some doctors possess: the ability to detach themselves from everything that isn't the focus of their thoughts at such moments.

Larriere shrugged.

-As always, doctor. It doesn't hurt more than when they move.

I looked at my father because I still didn't know exactly what he was thinking. On the way, he had told me about the long Larriere illness , a family trait that manifested itself in the men's twenties or thirties. His father suffered from the same thing, but in his case, there was an admirable latency period. In his son, however, the symptoms were premature and always intense. There were times when his belly swelled to the point of unbearable pain, and Dad was on the verge of operating. Why hadn't he? I asked him. He could only answer

evasively. That kind of doubt wasn't like him. If it had been me, like when I stood there watching Mom's accident, it would have been shameful.
That was the core of his character, you understand ? Stability in a center that never shifted, like a sun around which we all revolved—family, friends, and patients. The world, in short. And now, however, knowledge, which in his universe was as eternal as that center he believed to be stable, had become distorted. Letters were jumbled together, their meanings shifting, and numbers were added together, forming codes. The periodic table and anatomical nomenclature no longer held sway; instead, these codes, as difficult to memorize as they were to pronounce, prevailed.
A tree is a tree, and it grows under certain conditions. But a man is not a tree whose wounded trunk leaves scars on its bark, nor is a behavior the invariable sentence of a way of being.
He listened to us talking with the oncologist, exchanging opinions, discussing diagnostic hypotheses and study methods. X-rays, fluoroscopies, blood and fluid analyses, abdominal punctures. We had a CT scanner that the government had bought in the United States, but the Argentine technician was still in training. In any case, we decided that we would subject Larriere to that study.
When we were in the doctors' lounge, we didn't have time to talk about the case anymore. Dad's old colleagues appeared one after another. Mostly classmates from university, whom he hadn't seen since he'd moved back to the countryside. I was superfluous, of course. I think he even forgot about me when he left with Mateo's father. I didn't know it, but they'd been friends in the Anatomy and Hygiene department. I felt good for him. I'd seen him leave Larriere 's room with a worried expression, very similar to the one he'd had when Mom died. Anything that didn't fit into his established patterns not only worried him, it infuriated him. The god of his habits was static, but Rivadavia Hospital had unsettled him: the beds were like machines, the nurses hesitated, and the doctors spoke in gibberish. You laugh, of course, but that's how he told me. Sometimes it surprises me, because he's human too, of course. He criticizes the mechanization of medicine, yet he fights to keep the statues of ancient physicians standing. Which is better? Meanwhile, knowledge flows faster than our understanding. Writing manuals takes time

because it involves a factor that technology doesn't account for: the intuition of creation. You know this well : even a shopping list involves the human spirit.

On Wednesday, we took Larriere to the CT scanner room. I'd seen it in operation twice before, but there were only three in Buenos Aires, and the technician was constantly coming and going, taking his time. Setting up the machine took a couple of hours, and sometimes the equipment overloaded the electrical system, causing the lights to go out in the wards, which wasn't serious, but the lights in the operating rooms also went out. Meanwhile, we chatted in the technical room, filled with control panels and monitors; and beyond the window, the giant machine into whose mouth we had placed Larriere . We had to sedate him; he was scared. Accustomed to the vastness of the countryside, the narrow tunnel was synonymous with claustrophobia. "This has no future," my father said, with his hands behind his back and a frown, more scared than upset.

The technician didn't hide his smile, his eyes fixed on the buttons and knobs. We doctors doubted what we were seeing, but we were fascinated by the images on the X-ray films. We turned off the large lights and contemplated the whitish cysts on Vicente Larriere's abdomen. Those who didn't understand —and there were fifteen of us doctors at that meeting convened for this very special case—kept quiet for the entire duration of the meeting. Only my father spoke, because of his knowledge of the case history, always trying to fit what he saw with his preconceived notions (but he almost always failed when he tried to fit a square into a circle, and he canceled out the empty spaces). The Ibáñez family, father and son, opined that they were malignant polyps; the images only confirmed the results of the biopsies, which up to that point had been inconclusive and by no means definitive. The pathologists encountered contradictory results with each sample they took, and ambivalence ultimately became their guiding principle. But that's useless to surgeons, and we don't think we need it. When faced with uncertainty, we must explore as if in a virgin jungle or a frozen desert. It's like reaching into a dark place: the ecstasy is a symbiosis of fear and fulfillment. The result, in most cases, is frustration.

This was almost two weeks ago, and you know what happened. My father's constant pacing, his face contorted with anger, his tantrums. His use of our phone to handle his cases in town. His irritation constantly escalating. But the only one who feels alright now is the sick man who caused this whole situation. He wants to go to the ranch with his family. I saw his sister after so many years that, of course, I didn't recognize her. She's staying with an old family friend in Palermo, a relic of the old aristocracy, the Martins . She wants to take him with her, but she told me:

-Doctor, if you decide to operate, I want you to do it.

I understood: my old man's hands are worn. His fingers turn into branches when arthritis strikes, though he tries hard to hide them, but the pain shines in his eyes, and he is not a statue like the ones he idolizes, nor an anatomical specimen that no longer weeps. Anatomical form is happy because it is beautiful, and beautiful is both the teratogenic and the normal. Which will we choose, if the time comes? The spastic who resembles a crow or Michelangelo's David?

Anyway, Dad dumped the burden on me. He has to go; his patients are waiting for him, especially those he can save. I can see on his face that he regrets bringing him here, because he's carved the statue of failure into his conscience. Machines, modernity, technology, customs—these are the materials. Before, illness and death held no mysteries. They were ticks that could be easily removed from people's consciences and bodies. What had to die, was left to die, even with a scalpel in hand, trying to excise the inner demon. Ancient civilizations with their witch doctors knew this: you remove a mass, not the smallest entity. And the mass can be a planet, like a tumor in the brain. It all depends on the eyes that observe. The obsession with discovering the microcosm is a force that pulls us back to the macrocosm, and we can't stop it.

"Don Isidro Braulio, I already told you about him. He has prostate cancer. If you saw the old man, he'd complain more about his testicles, hard and useless as stones, than about dying. He keeps reminiscing about the old days with the village girls, back in the twenties, when he was a horny young man. He's ninety now, and to die like this, alone, especially since his son—your wife

knows him, I think—is a faggot who wants nothing to do with his father. That's why I have to go and do something."
"So what are you going to do?" I asked him.
-Cut off his balls and tell him to stop messing with those dumb girls with braids.
I stared at him.
Irony, in the end, redeemed him in a way.

3

For more than six months, Larriere was in and out of the hospital many times. Bernardo didn't always keep me informed, and then he wouldn't tell me anything anymore, although I saw him with a worried expression, lost in thoughts that seemed to wander through memorized books after he had wrestled with internal prejudices. The struggle of ideas against principles rooted in the marrow of the bones—as he allowed himself to say, wandering through lyricisms frowned upon by practical doctors— are the chambers of the soul. I think it was Herophilus who said that the soul was somewhere in the brain, but why there? Bernardo wondered, who, after all, and after so many centuries, knew more than the elementary Herophilus, if such a character even existed.
Vicente Larriere underwent chemotherapy, took medication, and had radiation treatments, but when they decided to operate, he refused time and again. His sister, whom I never met, accompanied him at first, but later the young man came to Buenos Aires alone, went to the hospital in the mornings, and in the afternoons locked himself in his hotel room on the corner of Libertad and Lavalle, dark like all those old buildings with thick walls that kept out the noise of the traffic. Perhaps he lay in bed and felt the movement of his inner inhabitants. The little monsters that were making him sick in order to survive. I imagined all this, of course, after listening to Bernie talk at length about the diagnostic hypotheses. When there isn't a definitive

diagnosis, everything is blamed on cancer, like a great bag of death that accepts everything. And welcome it is, says Ella, the Grim Reaper with her scythe, or simply an old woman carrying a bag that holds absolutely everything because it never seems to fill up. And it has no weight because it's full of souls. Does the soul have a size or a measure? I've read some of Beltrame's stories speculating about that. Such a theme isn't unusual for him; his own soul must be a great concern.

But Larriere slowly faded from the conversations in our dreary third-floor apartment on Sarmiento Street, a few blocks from the arches of the Abasto, the great market hall now closed and perpetually under renovation. And the arguments began again, over trivialities, disagreements, demands, and intolerances—absurdities that wear down love and subject what remains of our affection to an unnecessary test every single day.

Just when we were getting used to that routine, old Dr. Adalberto Ruiz died. A call came in from town in the middle of Saturday morning. Bernardo got up and went to the kitchen where the phone sat on a small table by the door. He was grumbling, convinced it was the emergency room. I heard him speak in monosyllables that could have been either agreement or disagreement. He hung up and went back to the bedroom. Without looking at me, he left again and went to the bathroom. I heard the stream of urine in the toilet, strong, then soft until it stopped, but he didn't come back. I got up and went to check on him. He was sitting on the toilet, naked, his hands covering his face.

- What's up, Bernie?

-I'm going to take a shower, please turn on the tap.

I did so, and as the water ran and slowly warmed up, I asked again:

- An emergency?

-Something like that, Ceci. But there's nothing we can do now.

- Did Larriere die ?

He looked at me and laughed.

No, he's still alive, and he'll be around for a long time, I think. The one who died this time was the doctor. My old man, Ceci, is finally gone.

He got up and stepped into the shower. I watched him as if I were seeing him for the first time in my life, as he let the water fall over his head and run down his body, perhaps bringing him relief. I took off my clothes and joined him. He

opened his eyes, which had been closed while the water acclimated him to a sensation he had been searching for within himself, a sensation he hadn't realized was something his body should surrender to. Always the body, I knew that well. Physical pain dominates the soul. That's why I wanted to comfort him and I hugged him, trying to imagine how long it had been since we had shared such intimacy. He rested his head on my shoulder and began to cry, I think, or perhaps it was the shower water trying to mask the pathetic weeping of a man who believed he had never loved his father, and yet he lamented for him like an abandoned child.

We quickly packed some things into a couple of bags, Bernardo called the hospital and we left at seven in the morning in the car, the Falcon that Ibáñez had sold him to buy the Peugeot in which he could be seen going back and forth all over Buenos Aires and La Plata.

We arrived in General Lavalle at midday. We drove through the quiet streets, which I was visiting for the first time, and which I would have enjoyed on another occasion. The country climate was pleasantly influenced by the proximity to the coast. The groves at the entrance cast intermittent shadows on the road, and rolling down the window, I could smell the scent of eucalyptus. I was then enveloped by the intensity of that aroma, which for a moment frightened me, because the radio was broadcasting the Pastoral Symphony, and the contrast with the situation we were experiencing unsettled me. What good, I asked myself, all my free thinking and my mother's supposed atheism, if the aesthetic and moral reservations of Catholicism surfaced so easily? Like the tacit prohibition against listening to music on Good Friday or eating red meat during Lent, feeling happy when someone had died just a few hours before represented a kind of blasphemy. The remnants of the Inquisition, perhaps. Moral oppression and shame were palpable.

I looked at Bernardo, his hands on the steering wheel, his gaze fixed on the road, undoubtedly listening to the magnificent strains of Beethoven's bucolic and transcendental music. I touched his shoulder, and he looked at me for a moment; his eyes were more than sad, resigned. He had been hoping for freedom with that death, probably, and perhaps even imagining himself

skipping across those fields to the rhythm of Beethoven. But suddenly he saw himself standing in the middle of the plain, alone, because the old man who had always been with him was gone. I saw his brow furrow in strange lines of uncertain thoughts, which I guessed were twisted because they were searching for themselves, if they weren't devouring each other because they had no other sustenance than their own flesh of conceptual ideas. And suddenly he stopped the car in front of an old house with gray walls, high ceilings with ornaments from the last century, tall and narrow doors and windows, and an immense gate that revealed the inner courtyard, full of plants and an old cistern. Now his face was blossoming, and that's why he turned off the radio. The happiness wasn't complete; it was merely a veneer that memory often paints on innocent faces. Memory is a grumpy old woman who enjoys teasing children, like this grown-up who had gotten lost for the first time in the middle of the street.

We went downstairs, and Bernardo pushed open the wrought-iron gate. We walked down the cool hallway toward the patio. Several people had gathered there, some chatting, others pacing under the pergola, and still others checking their watches and walking along the hallway toward the cobblestone sidewalk, waiting for the funeral service.

Bernardo introduced me to some of them: Aunt Edelmira, my mother's cousin, a spinster; a plump girl with a somewhat Mongolian appearance who laughed and cried simultaneously, whose hand Aunt Edelmira held with a peculiar and pathetic force; a tall, burly man who was Don Isidro Braulio, whom I had to agree to speak to because I knew his son, from whom I wanted news despite years of resentment or whatever else. There were neighbors from the town, and many others joined them, all patients of Dr. Ruiz, who filled their mouths with praise and lamentations as they also savored the empanadas and wine that my cousins Sara, Eva, Aurelia, Clara, and Rosa had brought from their homes three blocks away. They were the doctor's nieces, daughters of an uncle of Bernardo's who had died of anthrax in the now-forgotten epidemic of the 1930s. The five of them had been born a year apart, and their father had died a year later. The girls—I don't know which one—were telling me, amidst hushed laughter, that her mother had killed him so he wouldn't get her pregnant again. Was she stupid, or was she just pretending? The others didn't

seem any different, but a slight air of absentmindedness was more pronounced in the youngest.

Was that what Bernardo had hinted at so many times in Buenos Aires, the few times he spoke of his family? A congenital defect that manifested itself only occasionally and in certain individuals, and that came from both sides of the family. And it was women in every case, because men were scarce in those families. I remembered the Larriere family and their chronic illnesses that occurred almost exclusively in men.

The old house was ancient and large. I don't know how many rooms surrounded the courtyard. Doors and more doors, almost all identical, led not only to bedrooms, but also to kitchens and bathrooms. All on a sprawling ground floor that mimicked the flat countryside and the few trees that shaded the arcade: laurels, jasmine, rose bushes, lemon trees, loquats. The scent was so varied that it was never the same even after moving just a few meters. The flagstone path was lined with mosaics and tiles, clay pots with broken handles, and in the middle, the white cistern, sealed with a lid to prevent falls. But there were no children who could lean over and fall in. They were all grown up now, and I wondered if perhaps the Ruiz girls had ever dared to peer into the dark depths.

I sat down on the edge of a flowerbed, my legs weary. The men had offered me chairs, which I refused because I wanted to walk arm in arm with Bernardo, until they all demanded his attention so much that he seemed to have forgotten about me. One after another, the girls brought me soft drinks and pastries. They checked the time whenever an insurmountable gap appeared in the conversation, and they looked toward the cistern lid.

"Why did they wall it up?" I asked the one who must have been the second or third. They were all dark blondes, with their hair styled in buns in various positions, and that was enough for me to differentiate them a little.

He laughed, taking a sip from the glass that seemed to contain wine.

-We fell, miss.

- Call me Ceci, please. And you? Which one?

"All of them, Ceci. Sara was the first. She hit her head, that's what they told me because I don't remember. But Mom talked all the time about how each of us fell as we were born. Sara was the first, and she cut her forehead, that's

why she covers it with her bangs. She almost died. The doctor treated her, and he also pulled her out of the well with a rope. 'She was on the verge of death,' that's what they said at home, in the village, and at church. They took such good care of her that she became very rude, not like us, miss. She's very spoiled and pretentious. She uses her scar to beg for attention from relatives. She always got the best birthday and Christmas presents. Then we did the same thing, we fell..."

-One after the other, I suppose...

Yes. I broke my arm because it got caught in the chain, and I was left hanging. I got my skin all raw. I almost regretted it when I saw my arm all raw. But what came after was worth it, the gifts and the kindness.

She showed me the scarred skin under the sleeve of her dress.

Then came Aurelia, one night she was sleepwalking. She landed on her feet in the deep water. She broke her heels and was in casts for six months. That one got the better of us, imagine six months in bed, with food on a tray and no school. Well, then Clara fell... But do you want me to continue, because the funeral home is about to arrive?

-Keep telling the story, my dear...

"Well, my sister fell while playing, she didn't do it on purpose. She was such a good jump rope player that she built a ladder up to the cistern, because it's the only high thing we have around here. We weren't allowed to go out to play in the street and the roof didn't appeal to us much yet."

-Yes, I imagine cesspools are more interesting...

- How do you know?

-I'm a woman too, Eva, but I kept going...- I already saw in that story a good article, or at least a story to publish.

Clara had refused because Mom was talking about the suffering she had endured for her daughters, and she didn't want to make her cry. The three of us made fun of her because of her fear.

-But wait a minute, why didn't they seal up the cistern after the first one fell in?

He shrugged.

-They used it...

"That seems strange to me," I said. "All the cisterns are dry now, except for the rainwater, and you're not going to tell me they were drinking that water..."
"No, Ceci, we have shins for that." And she laughed, the silly girl, suddenly finding an opportunity to mock someone she thought was smarter.
-Okay, so what happened to...Clara, right?
-Since she didn't want to fall, we pushed her.
Thirty seconds of silence, two short sips of soda or wine, whatever.
- And what broke?
-Nothing, but she was stung by a scorpion that was at the bottom. They had to amputate one of her feet; the doctor operated on her. She's the one who walks with a limp, do you see her?
She pointed me out to a girl who was limping as she carried a tray from group to group. There was hardly any space left in the courtyard. The branches of the bushes were being pushed aside by people walking along the paths, people who were meeting up again after a long time. There were greetings and a lot of laughter, which they tried to muffle with abrupt and inappropriate changes in their voices.
-There's one left, right?
"Rosa, yes. She didn't want to know anything about it, and even though we forced her, she started screaming and Mom came running. She reported us, can you believe it? So Mom ordered Dad to put up the wall. Aunt Edelmira refused a lot. She complained to the municipality. They treat her well there."
- Does he have influence?
- What do I know? Maybe it's because he was the doctor's assistant for a long time.
I had some ideas.
- And not anymore?
"I think she had a falling out with the doctor. Ever since I've known them, they've given each other strange looks and don't speak. It's all because of the cistern, you know ? People from the municipality are always coming to get her, and she rushes out to attend to any emergency involving babies and other things."

Small town, big hell, I thought to myself. I touched the lid and told myself the business had closed for a while.
- And what about that sick girl, the chubby one, who's with her aunt?
"That's bad, Ceci, none of us speak to her. They accuse her of..." She leaned close to my ear and pronounced the word "lust."
I looked around at the men. Almost all of them were from the village, but many were strangers. People from neighboring towns, maybe from all over the province, and from Buenos Aires. Abortions, selling babies, the traditional business of small towns. Drugs are from the cities, prostitution too, but in the countryside, children are born like rabbits, and everyone has the same mentality as that species.
I entered the room where they were holding the old man's wake. Bernardo was sitting in a chair against the wall. On either side of him were two women who looked like professional mourners from an Italian novel. When they saw me, they got up and left. I sat down next to him and took his hand.
- How are you feeling?
He shrugged. A while later, I couldn't suppress my curiosity.
"You know what's going on here, right?" I gestured, looking outside at the patio.
-I was born here, Ceci.
-So your dad did you a favor by giving you reasons to leave.
He was about to say something I had a feeling I wouldn't like, but a man interrupted us, standing in front of us and extending his hand to greet us. Bernardo looked at him, seemed to hesitate for just a moment, and then suddenly stood up and they embraced.
He had no brothers or male cousins. He was a man his age, perhaps just a little older. He had a curly, somewhat long beard, shoulder-length dark brown hair, and blue eyes like a clear sky.
"My condolences," he said, in an unmistakable French accent, perhaps from Provence or Brittany, with his lips almost touching Bernardo's shoulder.
They must have been very good friends, because I'd never seen him get so emotional with anyone else. He turned around and introduced me.
-Cecilia, this is Mauricio Dergan.

They looked at each other with excited smiles, patting each other on the back as if they couldn't believe that reunion.
-Ceci, he's the reason I left town.
-I don't understand…
Dergan said , "...excuse me...the old doctor didn't like me. I never knew why, but that's how parents are; they're obsessed with choosing their children's friends, and especially since Bernardo was an only child, he had pinned all his hopes on him. I was a bad influence back then, and I still am."
The joke, which wasn't meant to be a joke, further strengthened their bond. We went out to the patio and sat down. It was two in the afternoon and the funeral procession hadn't arrived yet. They told me about the old days, about the tragedy of the Espinoza brothers.
-You can still see them around here, complaining about the land, poorer than mice.
- And what do you do, Mauricio?
-I'm a veterinarian, Cecilia.
He told me about his childhood in Europe, his arrival in the province, and there was no need for further explanation. He had a flask of whiskey which he pulled openly from his jacket, raising his elbow and pushing aside his long hair. But alcohol is just a symptom in him. I've seen many, and I knew that for Bernardo, there was no mystery. I noticed the pallor of his face and hands, which stood out against the dark clothing, worn by the shiny hue at the elbows, collar, and cuffs. His black trousers were stained with dark, dried blood that would have passed for mere dirt to anyone who hadn't seen bloodstains on the clothing of a healthcare professional. His conversation was cultured and polite; he didn't raise his voice, but I sensed he was one of those who reserved his anger for certain moments when frustration and resentment converged. They were explosions, outbursts from which it was best to distance oneself or remain silent. I knew it, Bernardo, with some differences, he had the same temperament.
And Bernardo watched him talk with a strange glee on his face that I hadn't seen in a long time. At first, they included me in the conversation, but then they started talking about the old days, and then Bernie rubbed his eyes with his right fist, like little boys do. Dergan took his other hand and patted it

affectionately, winking at me in on it. I thanked him for that help, because the emotional distance had taken its toll on our relationship, and I didn't know how to communicate with him. I wondered, then, if it wasn't really me who was drifting apart. Like two people walking together, lost in thought and with their eyes fixed on the dirt and dust, their steps slow down: one goes faster, or the other slower, or both at the same time. When we look up, we realize we have to look ahead or behind us, and maybe, with luck, we can still see each other.

Bernardo got up from his chair and went back inside. The coffin was still open. We accompanied him, staying behind. Contradictory feelings flowed across Bernie's face, both from the anger that was manifesting itself and from the kind of liberation he had gained with this death. Dergan approached him as soon as he saw the movement of his shoulders and hugged him. He seemed to be restraining him, not in his grief, but in his anger, as if holding him back so that he wouldn't start violating the body that was no longer responsible for itself. The grievance, I thought, that tries to manifest itself too late, and knows it, that's why it grieves and becomes bitter and writhes in its own impotence. Sometimes Bernardo's face was a complete contradiction of feelings and moods. Joy tried to gain ground when he looked at us; placidity or fulfillment, I don't know, when he looked into my eyes, which suddenly clouded over, exactly as happens in a summer sky above a seaside beach. The radiant sun was suddenly filled with gray clouds that turned black, and the cold intensified; something unfathomable was germinating in the air, something invisible desperate to manifest itself. Now that the old man had died, he was master of his own conscience, but he was only just realizing that his conscience had had several owners for a long time. One of them was a kind of landowner who exploited the hectares (his mother's death, his medical studies); another was a neighbor (perhaps me) who occupied very little space, not too demanding, but to whom he had granted that land, fearful of what the landowner would think of the way he, Bernardo, occupied the very lands of his conscience.

And there was Mauricio Dergan, a stranger to me, but judging by his behavior, he owned more land than I did, yet his occupation had always been clandestine. It was an area the old man had condemned as execrable, but

Bernardo had secretly reserved it, never occupying it or granting it to anyone. It had become a dead zone.

When they parted, Bernardo remained with his hands resting on the edge of the coffin, as if weighing the burden of his legacy. The body bore the weight of the sick he had left behind, perhaps Larriere , maybe many others, but above all was the day of the accident in the field, those seconds of stillness before his mother and her mare that were his undoing. The legacy, then, was a sentence.

I placed my hands on his shoulders and my head on his back. He said nothing, nor did he reach out to stroke me. In my imagination, I saw him trying to stay upright, carrying a coffin in front of him and my body on his back.

Saturday hours passed. I was told the funeral service had been postponed until Sunday morning. Countless neighbors continued to come and go, offering their condolences to the family and bidding farewell to Dr. Ruiz. The mayor arrived with one or two aides and they spoke at length with Bernardo. He returned to where Dergan and I were waiting in a couple of chairs under the grapevine, next to a table laden with food and drink that was constantly being replenished as the Ruiz sisters changed shifts. They were tireless, and for a moment, weary of so many people, I thought it was all the same person, and each sister's wounds seemed to have merged into one. It was seven-thirty, and it was already dark, and the lights in the patio, from the old lanterns, illuminated the tables, chairs, and clothing of the people coming and going from the mortuary. The Ruiz who was now replenishing the table was a mixture of all of them. Perhaps I was dizzy and my blood sugar was out of whack, which is why I thought I saw a limp, a broken arm, and scars on her face and arms. For a moment, my imagination, which seemed to be bound to my will, betrayed me. As she was leaving and her back was hiding all those strange features, I realized she was the last of the sisters, the only one who hadn't "fallen" into the cistern.

"You're tired, aren't you, Cecilia?" Mauricio asked me.

-Yeah.

"Just hang on a little longer, that's how we are in small towns. We don't have much patience for things we can do ourselves; we just go and do them. But we're slow, and there are some things that don't bother us. We like to talk for

hours about the same thing or to keep quiet listening to the dogs barking in the fields. Nobody rushes. That's why Dr. Ruiz had such a hold on them all. His intelligence had pointed out the point where he could manipulate the will of others at will."
"Guilt is a great tool for that," I told him.
"Are you referring to Bernardo? Of course, he had to exercise full authority over him. Being his son, he shared his intelligence and idiosyncrasies. He had to deal with both."
-And he won the war, even after he was dead.
Who knows…
"I see you two are very fond of each other." The sarcasm came out. Resentment was fueling it.
-That's right, Cecilia. Friendship between two men cannot be defined. It's complicity; it's, I would say, a kind of love.
- Unconditional, more so than that of a couple, perhaps?
"You remind me of Ada. She was as intuitive as only someone with her personality could be. She knew when to speak or when to be silent, when to caress or when to reprimand. She accepted the inevitable aspects of someone's character with a tolerance that was never criticized in the person who granted it. Or at least, most of the time, she tried not to."
Bernie arrived and sat down on the other side of the set table, sprawled out. He took off the tie he had worn all day and unbuttoned three buttons of his shirt.
-The mayor wants to say a few words of tribute tomorrow at the cemetery.
I laughed.
-We're in the twentieth century, my love, what's this about a cemetery?
the cemetery in Le Coeur Antique, ” Dergan explained to me. “ It’s a tiny village of two blocks nearby. Didn’t you tell Bernie? That’s where the middle-class families of these parts are buried.”
-I see, a fiefdom. This is all very interesting; it seems we Buenos Aires residents are quite ignorant…
They both couldn't help but laugh. But as if the body in the room were listening, Bernardo suddenly fell silent and his face turned contrite again.

"You hit the nail on the head, Cecilia. You summed up the whole problem of Argentine history in one powerful sentence."
- And it's a Frenchman telling me this?
"That's precisely why I'm telling you. What is their literature, their philosophy, and even their constitutional law, if not a monstrosity born of the French spirit, both irascible and educated, often nonconformist and irrational? A Parisian working woman who, in the midst of the revolution, raised high the testicles she had cut off from a bourgeois man in the middle of the street."
- And our father?
-Some Jesuit, possibly. Austere, capable, wise and astute, and all that mixed in various doses that have given rise to indolence, boastfulness and severity.
-Stubbornness ...

Dergan was laughing uncontrollably. Many people were staring at him, and he decided to cover his mouth.
"Go ahead and keep talking. I'm going to sleep," said Bernardo, yawning.
-I'm going with you...
-No, stay .
He left and I lost sight of him among the others.
- Where are you going to sleep?
-In his old childhood bedroom, I suppose. I'll show it to him...
We walked among the people, who greeted him listlessly. They didn't recognize me. We walked through two sections of the inner arcade, passing several doors until we reached one with two clay pots in front of it, each containing a dead plant. We knocked and went in. Bernardo had fallen asleep on the bed. The bedroom was typical of a man from that place and that family: numerous books, folders on a *secretary desk* , old reproductions of rural scenes on the walls, and several crucifixes. The ceiling was peeling and the walls damp. The bed was large and had a quilt woven from kidskin. The wardrobe took up an entire wall. It was so tall that the space between the top and the ceiling was filled with suitcases and bags of blankets, probably, or who knows.
I approached him and kissed him. He, still not fully awake, tried to grab me.
"I'll leave you now, see you early tomorrow," said Dergan .

- And where are you going to sleep?
-In some other room, I live far from here and I came by bus.
-Wait, help me take off her clothes because I can't do it alone.
- *Excuse me .*
-It doesn't matter, I'm flattered that you didn't see me as an invalid.
While he held it sitting up in bed, I pulled out the quilt, which smelled of musty dampness. I looked for sheets in the closet, and it took me a long time to open and close drawers and go through shelves with hundreds of old things and boys' and men's clothes from other decades. I had probably inherited clothes from my grandfather, which back then lasted much longer than they do now, and he had gotten used to dressing that way. Even now, he would go to the hospital in a suit and tie, and change into his scrubs there or put his lab coat on over them.
I went back to bed with the plain white sheets that were not free of the smell of mothballs.
Bernardo was sitting with his arms hanging down and resting his head on Dergan 's belly .
- It's not heavy, is it?
-Not at all...
-Then lift it up a little, I have to hang it up.
While I did it with exasperating slowness, I observed the image of the two of them like two siblings who perhaps had never fought. When I realized the pillow was missing, I went out to look for another one. I looked for the Ruiz sisters, but only found Rosa with an empty tray in her hands.
-Yes, of course, Miss Cecilia. We don't live here, but it's as if we were part of the family. The Black woman who worked for the doctor is old now and only cooked for him and made his bed.
I waited by a column, watching the wake unfold. Fewer people, less noise, and soon, the silence of the night arrived from the nearby countryside, hiding in the cracks between the cobblestones, only surprised by the few dogs that dared to betray it. But the dark night could do little against them, its incorruptible messengers.
I returned with the old feather pillow. I found that Mauricio had already undressed Bernardo and covered him with the sheets, and Dergan himself

was lying next to him, wearing the same black clothes, his disheveled hair covering half his face.
"Mauricio," I said in a low voice.
Did I really want to wake him up?
I adjusted the pillow under Bernie's head as best I could. I headed for the door and looked at them one last time before leaving. I told myself that guilt comforts itself, perhaps. And I, who felt no guilt, carried the tragic sense of my life like a cancer.

4

On Sunday at six thirty in the morning I got up and went to Bernardo's bedroom. I found them both almost dressed for the funeral. Mauricio greeted me from the bathroom, where he was styling his long hair with some gel, his shirt open, revealing his thin, bony chest with curly hair.
Bernardo kissed me.
"How are you feeling?" I asked him.
-I'm fine, don't worry, Ceci. Where did you sleep?
-With one of the Ruiz sisters.
" Let me guess which one," said Dergan , coming out of the bathroom and buttoning his shirt. "The one-eyed one, I imagine."
"There isn't a single one-eyed woman," I replied.
-There should have been…
I appreciated the sarcasm that rescued us from boredom and gloom.
- How are you? Did you change your bandages? Did you take the antibiotic? I forgot to tell you there are bandages in the bathroom…
"I already did all that," I interrupted. "Don't get so worked up about it."
There was a knock at the door and one of the Ruiz sisters peeked out.

- Well "Good morning ," she said, extending her greeting and carrying a full tray. "I brought you breakfast, and you too, miss." When I returned to the room she had already left, but I imagined she was with the gentlemen.
-Thank you very much, Rosa, right?
He nodded and said that the funeral home staff would arrive at seven. When he left, Bernardo said:
"That's the one-eyed girl, Mauricio was right. When she fell into the well, she lost sight in one eye. When she was little, she would trip over things and look around with her head tilted, but she soon adapted."
-But the others told me she was the only one who didn't fall...
-That's because you can't tell at all about him and they resent him.
Bernardo finished dressing in the black suit he'd found in the wardrobe—old, but still fitting. He said it must be the same one he'd worn when he graduated as a doctor and they held a reception for him in the village. Dergan , his hair neatly combed and wearing his dark overcoat that covered his worn clothes, looked strange, as always, but with a very understated elegance.
-You two are doing very well, you make a good couple.
" Stop joking around, Ceci," Bernardo told me, and brought me a woman's dress from the closet .
"It belonged to my mother; I found it by chance this morning. She used it when she was young, before she got married, and she'd put the clothes she didn't use anymore in the closets of the other rooms. It's full of her and my father's clothes."
I changed and looked at myself in the mirror on one of the dresser doors. It was black, with lace and discreet ruffles on the sleeves and a high neck; it reached just below my knees.
"You look like Ada," said Dergan .
Bernardo stared at me, just as he must have on the day of the accident. He didn't move, he didn't come to his mother's aid. And I saw in his eyes the worry for me. Guilt, of course, was at work. And I was the object of his atonement.
"You'll make my cousins jealous," she said, hugging me.
-I highly doubt it, you have a very unique family.
"And what family isn't?" Mauricio said.

I turned around and straightened his jacket collar. I kissed him on the cheek and thanked him for taking care of Bernardo.
"And you, do you have family here or in France?" I asked, with my usual lack of tact.
He got rid of my hands, which had been resting for a moment on his beard.
-My family is dogs.
As if it were an omen, barking was heard from the street.
"The undertakers have arrived," said Bernie.
We went out into the courtyard. About fifteen men dressed in mourning had entered. Some were waiting at the door and in the hallway leading to the street. Others were organizing people in the courtyard, answering questions and giving directions with somber gestures. Four of them introduced themselves to Bernardo and paid their respects. They asked him to accompany them to the mortuary. Mauricio and I stayed outside, listening to the murmurs and the tapping of hammers on the wooden coffin. Then they came out carrying the coffin. Bernardo followed them, stopped so I could take his arm, and we went out onto the sidewalk. They left the coffin in the hearse, and we got into another one. Then the journey to the cemetery, or the graveyard, as they called it, began.
First came the highway, under a clear sky. Fifteen minutes later, we left it to turn onto a dirt road. As the car rounded the bend, I glanced in the rearview mirror at the long caravan following us, as if the entire town were accompanying us. The tree-lined path gave way to a small plaza, surrounded by the usual buildings: a general store, a feed store , and other businesses that appeared to be closed. Then we followed another road that grew narrower and narrower until we stopped and got out. The dust kicked up by the cars reached us on the wind, and for a long time, we could barely see each other. Then I saw a group emerge from the dust that was slowly settling, its footsteps already rising again. They were people approaching, or solitary individuals, like old Isidro Braulio, who, despite his own ailments, accompanied the old doctor who had abandoned him and become angry with him. Perhaps today he came with guilt, or perhaps to rehearse a ceremony that would soon feature him.

And from the dust appeared four old women, as if they had sprung from the earth of the road, made of dried clay and molded by the heat of a forge. Or perhaps they had emerged from the sparse, dry weeds along the roadside, for there was nothing but truncated tree trunks. All of them wore old-fashioned dresses, were nearly the same height, wore no makeup, their hair gathered in a bun at the nape of their necks, and wore black veils that concealed the color of their hair. They greeted us, offering their condolences. As I shook their hands, I felt a shudder that I couldn't quite define, of course, precisely because uncertainty is the essence of premonitions. They went ahead of the coffin and began the procession to the cemetery.

We followed the procession behind the coffin, which the Gonçalvez family—that's what the funeral home workers were called—carried on their shoulders. Bernardo explained to me that the old women owned the funeral home, all from aristocratic families who had come from Europe before or during the wars. I watched them walk calmly and deliberately, but after almost half an hour, I asked:

- Is it much longer?

I had left my crutches in the car, hoping to lean on Bernie's arm, but he was distracted. What else could I expect, given the situation? He sometimes had to leave me alone to attend to the people who spoke to him. He offered to go back to the car to get them, but I discouraged him. I continued on my way, limping and leaning on him. The shoes I had put on were also Ada's, captivated by those old, elegant clothes I had found in the closet. But the truth is, illness doesn't tolerate elegance, and that's why death is so alluring. Its sophistication lies in the refinement and discretion of its contours.

We finally arrived at the wide field, dotted with stone gravestones among low bushes. The mayor and two assistants had been waiting for us for an hour. They had set up a low platform, and he invited us to sit beside him while he spoke. He praised the old doctor's character, his dedication to the town, his wisdom and generosity, the kindness of his nature, and his selflessness in the service of medicine. He was certain that his memory would never fade because he had bequeathed the same virtues to his son. The town would remain in good hands, he said, because the blood of the father flowed in the son's hands.

A strange image, I told myself, surely a deliberate grammatical construction with a clear intention. I saw Bernardo flinch, I don't know if from feeling obligated to stay in the village or from the intense desire to be rid of his father. The truth is that all the conjectures were left to his own imagination, and of course, to mine, whether because of my sentimental attachment to him, or because of what my mother called feminine intuition. Witchcraft, she cursed, abhorring that aspect that condemned women to both contempt and ignominy. She was one of the few who had renounced the premonition of the future for a shred of true rational thought.

The speech ended, the coffin was lowered into the grave, and silence fell. No birds, no sound at all. I thought I was deaf for a minute. There was no wind, no breathing, no coughing, not even the soft rustle of a shoe sole on dry earth. I even expected to hear the tiny legs of the beetle that circled my bandaged, ailing foot inside a low-heeled shoe.

When reality returned—because the sound of things is their essence—I tried to get up to say goodbye to the mayor who had approached, but I couldn't stay on my feet. Then the mayor told me he was giving me the chair, and he ordered the men of the service to take me to the car. They did it with as much gentleness as they had with the coffin, so much so that I barely felt the slightest movement or discomfort, as if my body were practicing the sensations of death.

In the afternoon, the siesta was a hazy interlude of dust and silence that flooded the streets back to the village and then settled in the courtyard of the old house. Each person went into their room after walking along the tiled floor and brushing against the walls with their baseboards and tiles, like in Mujica Láinez's story. Little men and goblins in a place where the black light is the messenger of strange creatures.

Bernardo and Dergan went for a walk. I lay down after taking a painkiller, which was more of a sedative to make me forget the pain. Am I right? It's just a theory; everyone experiments with their own body, finds ways to fight the enemy, the one that lives with me, the one I carry, the one that inhabits me, the one that screamed with me the day I was born. The same one that will only fall silent when I die.

That's why I thought I was dreaming when I heard the moans. I turned over in bed, drowsy from the sedative and the exhaustion of that weekend's tension, which my body had absorbed as if it were responsible for everything. Then I opened my eyes and looked at the clock on the nightstand. It was four in the afternoon. I had no idea when the siesta ended in those towns; I thought it was at five, but I heard footsteps in the yard, a woman running, and shouts muffled by anger. All of it had the sound characteristics of a dream, that is, of something not heard but imagined. The imagination of the ear is strange, even more so than that offered by sight. What is seen, although imagined, is right there, and its falsity is only confirmed by the elusiveness of the images when we try to touch them. But auditory hallucinations are on another plane, it seems to me. They slip away from certainties and accept any explanation. That's why we often ignore them. But how to avoid those awkward conversations and the frequent calls for silence from female mouths that said "shh, shh" with a finger on their lips?

That's what I imagined was happening outside. I got up and peeked out the door into the hallway. Nothing. Since I was already awake, I decided to go to the kitchen and make myself some tea, maybe, or whatever was there. There must have been a lot left in the refrigerator from the wake. (Another subtle mortuary metaphor, I told myself.) I knew where the kitchen was, but I'd never been in it. I think I wandered around the patio and got lost, missing closed doors. I heard a moan again. The voice sounded unfamiliar. I thought about the women who must have been at the house that weekend. It certainly wasn't the Ruiz sisters; I remembered their voices, and besides, they weren't the type to complain about pain, but perhaps to enjoy it. The voice was low and deep, but it was definitely a woman's because of the tone and rhythm. A man's wordless moan is different, but I wouldn't know how to describe it. The voice he was now listening to came from the back room, the one that was on the corner with the vacant lot that occupied the rest of the block.

I stood before the door, wooden and windowless, with interior curtains like the rest of the house. I thought about announcing myself and asking, but if I did, those inside—because I knew there were others besides the one complaining—would change their tune, falling silent and stopping what they were doing. And I sensed it was something I was interested in seeing, not

because it was commonplace, but because it was unusual. Perhaps inappropriate, maybe forbidden. I imagined many things; I only saw, upon opening the door, the large bed with wooden legs and extra supports, and on it, surrounded by sheets stained with shit and blood, the mentally challenged woman I had seen the previous afternoon. Aunt Edelmira's niece, from Bernardo's mother's family. The girl, naked and showing all the signs of an advanced pregnancy, her skin covered in cesarean scars, thrashed and screamed like a pig, though she was trying hard to contain herself. She didn't see me because her eyes were covered by wet hair and her eyelids were closed. I had barely opened the door and peeked out, so my aunt didn't see me when she came out of the bathroom with a surgical kit in her hands. She sat on the bed, her back to me, and I saw her pick up a syringe with a hypodermic needle and then inject it into the girl's stomach. Then the screams subsided and silence fell. I heard the Ruiz sisters' voices. I quickly closed the door and looked out at the patio. Two of them were approaching, talking and laughing nervously, with folded sheets in their arms. They didn't see me because the rose bushes forced them to go around to get to the hallway.

"Miss Ceci," one of them surprised me as I tried to go back to the room. "Are you awake yet? Would you like some mate? I made some biscuits myself."

-Later.

“Yes,” the other said, “we’re very busy right now, miss. We’ll serve tea at five.” And as she walked away, I noticed one scolding the other for her indiscretion. The main thing was that they hadn’t seen me spying. I sat down at the desk where Bernardo must have studied. I searched the drawers and found yellowed papers, but blank. I found an old pen and an inkwell with dried ink. There were no ballpoint pens, only pencils. I wrote a draft of an article about what was happening in that town.

Exactly at five o'clock, I heard a flurry of footsteps. It was the Ruiz sisters preparing afternoon tea and distributing it to the rooms. I didn't know anyone who lived in that house. Since their father wasn't there anymore, who lived there? My cousins had their own house a few blocks away. Aunt Edelmira and her niece lived there because of the old man. Could Bernardo be considering

moving to town? The thought sent a shiver down my spine. Where would I belong, then?

But the smell of biscuits and cakes, warm bread, and jam reached the room, tempting me. There was a knock at the door. Rosa was inviting me to sit with them in the patio. I put the papers in a drawer and went out. They had set a table with a tablecloth, teapots, kettles, and a mate gourd. Platters of cookies and fried cakes looked temptingly appetizing. The tea set was antique and beautiful; the teaspoons and butter knives were silver.

"Are you writing something, miss?" Aunt Edelmira asked me. Rosa had already told her the story about seeing me at my desk.

"Yes, aunt." And I responded to the indiscretion with another indiscretion.

"And how is the girl?"

The aunt was left holding the mate gourd halfway to her lips. Smoothing her brow, she tried to hide her surprise.

-Matilde is fine now, she always suffers from indispositions, you understand…

The Ruiz sisters laughed, covering their mouths in embarrassment.

"I understand," I said. "It's God's punishment for being women."

"Do you think so, miss?" she retorted. "I think it's a gift, and those who complain are the barren ones. You hate what you envy, don't you agree?"

Yes, they had brought him several stories about me. That's a favorite pastime in small towns, but I knew they had other, more interesting ones.

The men arrived, and there was a flurry of skirts around them, especially since they were young and unusual. That's the word to describe the trio who entered the courtyard and greeted everyone. Bernardo sat next to me while he invited another young man they had found in the street, tall and thin-faced, but with a prominent belly under his shirt, which was as wide as a skirt. He looked Jewish, I think, and his clothes suggested it to me, like an old custom, so old and common that no one noticed that vestige of tradition anymore.

-Ceci, this is Vicente, the one I told you about, Dad's patient.

We shook hands, and he looked at my crutches leaning behind the chair with a knowing glance. Dergan was talking to the Ruiz sisters, who hovered around him like flies despite his attempts to avoid them with gruff gestures and swear words in French. And that, precisely, was the allure that drew them in: Mauricio's eccentric way of speaking and his appearance. He spoke

of animals and men as if they were the same kind of specimens, and we all knew that when he described an operation or animal diseases, it was a euphemism for human beings. What Bernardo wouldn't have tolerated hearing, Mauricio would have presented as an anecdote tinged with cosmopolitanism.
Along with the three of them, a fourth male dog had entered, one of the many stray dogs that habitually attached themselves to Dergan only to disappear a few hours later, accompanying him wherever he went, as silently as they had appeared. He had reddish fur, and the women, after arguing for a bit, agreed to call him Wolf. Aunt Edelmira approached us and whispered something in Bernardo's ear. He got up quickly and said to me:
-I'll be right back.
I saw them enter Matilde's room. It took much longer than expected.

It must have been around eight o'clock at night when I woke with a start. The lick on my face from the dog's tongue, which had come in that afternoon, was rough but pleasant. I opened my eyes and saw Bernardo, standing by the desk with the drawer open, leafing through what I had written.
- When are you going to publish it, because as far as I know you're unemployed, or maybe your black friend will make things easier for you?
There was anger in his eyes, and his voice, more than his words, was like a drill in my ears. I wasn't offended by his sarcasm or surprised by his anger, but his malice made me raise my defenses.
"Don't talk nonsense, Bernardo. You know I write out of necessity, sometimes to make sense of things that happen, you know. Don't make me explain what you already know ."
I sat on the bed. The dog went to him after I called him, as if he wanted to get away from me. Those whims of an immature boy, an only child perhaps, or whatever he was, exasperated me more than any insult.
-Also, who gave you permission to read them?
"This is my house and my office," he said.
- And where do I fit in with those belongings?
I went to the bathroom and closed the door. I looked in the mirror and washed my face. The dog scratched at the door from outside; Bernardo called

him, loud and angry. I told myself he'd get over it, that he was tired and distressed; after all, his father had died.
I went out, ready to reconcile. I had already put the papers back in the drawer. Leaning on the desk with his palms, his head was bowed between his shoulders and his eyes were closed. I hugged him from behind.
-Bernie, let's not argue, please. I just want to comfort you, that's all.
He turned around abruptly, almost knocking me over. He didn't manage to catch me; I think he didn't care because he knew it would happen. He was furious at the world, and I was caught in it.
-Okay, okay. I think something important happened at Matilde's, didn't it?
- What do you want to know, anything to complete your report?
I took a deep breath and slapped him. He looked at me in astonishment, his eyes sparkled, and then, after sitting down in the chair, he covered his face and started to cry.
"They want me to stay, you understand ? And I don't know what to do. It's what the old man would have wanted, everyone says so, and I remember that every time he spoke to me he reproached me for leaving, but it was he who kicked me out, until I got better, until I learned, until I became a man and a doctor..." He spoke nonstop and almost without taking a breath.
-People are dying, Bernie, and the only good thing is that we don't have to answer to them anymore.
"But he's still here," she said, tapping her temples with her hands. "And everyone reminds me of it..."
-Then let's go back to Buenos Aires and forget about them.
-You don't know what the bonds of a people are, stronger than those of blood.
I didn't know how to fight those ties, or what my place was.
-I'm just asking you to think it over carefully, and whatever you decide, don't quit the hospital, you can adjust your schedule.
Then the dog ran to the door and began jumping and barking desperately. We heard a scream outside, then others, from women. Bernardo went out and the dog ran after Matilde, who was on the edge of the cistern. The patio light was on, and I saw her lifting the metal lid, which looked heavy, but the girl was the size and strength to do it. I couldn't stop her in time: the lid was already on the ground, and she was throwing something into the well. The dog got

there first and started barking frantically. Bernardo leaned over the edge and grabbed Matilde, half-naked, with large, flabby breasts like those of a forty-year-old woman. Her stomach was stained with blood, the same blood I saw trailing down the hallway from her room. Bernie caught her before she fell to the floor. The girl moaned like an animal, without a single intelligible word. Aunt Edelmira had arrived in a dressing gown with her hair loose, and three of the Ruiz sisters were watching from the grape arbor, frightened and holding hands.

He and his aunt carried Matilde to the room. I went with them and helped as much as I could, straightening the dirty sheets and looking for towels. Then his aunt said:

-The boy.

Bernardo ran towards the cistern. That's what Matilde had thrown in. He climbed onto the rope hanging from the pulley and began to descend.

"My God," I said, but one of the Ruiz sisters hugged me and said not to worry, that Bernardo did that when he was a kid.

We didn't peer into the darkness at the bottom, and Matilde's screams reached us, continuous and exasperating. Of course, she wasn't a teenager, but an elderly woman who had been used as a procreator for who knows how many years. What did they do with the children? Sell them, obviously, and those that were born dead or sick ended up in the cistern. Matilde was mentally ill, and she had done nothing more than repeat what she had seen done before.

Bernardo's voice reached us from the back.

"Pull!" he shouted. Did he expect us to have the strength to lift him? Where was Mauricio, who hadn't appeared amidst all the commotion?

- Go find Dergan - I told Sara, or Eva, whatever.

They looked at me, shrugged, and went to look for him.

-They've already gone to look for Mauricio, just hang on a little longer. Are you okay? Did you find anything?

-Yes, lots of bugs. Do me a favor and hurry him up, he must be sleeping off his hangover, you know .

I realized when he arrived; he was drunk, but he could still stand. I explained that he had to grab the rope and pull. He laughed like an idiot, but he did what he had to do.

-I'm here, Bernardo, I'm here, dear, I'll bring you up.

The girls laughed. Then Bernardo emerged, as if from the dark abyss, his clothes half-torn and dirty, clinging to the rope with one hand and carrying a newborn baby in the other arm.

"I think he's dead," she said.

But once in the room, after cleaning him up, he examined him. He was breathing, but his arms and legs were limp. I watched from behind Bernardo as he gently moved him, turning him over, feeling him, cleaning him, and not letting the women interfere. None of them, however, tried. They watched, enraptured, while Mauricio did the same, sitting on the bed and drinking coffee that Rosa had brought him. She sat beside him, watching him as if to protect him. It was clear she was in love with this man who was ten or fifteen years older than her and who couldn't reciprocate her feelings.

The baby began to cry, a sign of recovery. Bernardo told me that Matilde had given birth to him two or three hours earlier. She hadn't expected him to live, but they had left him in the crib next to the bed. Matilde was thirty-nine years old, he told me, and it was utter stupidity what her aunt was doing to her at that age: the risk of giving birth to sick children whom she would later have to get rid of, and the risk of Matilde's death. But none of this worried the old woman; the dead children could be hidden, and Matilde had been expected to die since she was fifteen. The only thing that worried the aunt was the loss of her sources of income. She had tried to find other girls, she had even tried to convince the Ruiz sisters, who were orphans, but they were too reluctant: they loved their bodies to the point of only harming them in the way they chose. He had looked for young women with braids from the countryside, as old Ruiz used to say, but most of them left for Buenos Aires after their first childbirth. Only Matilde remained to protect him in his old age, and Matilde would soon die, if not tonight.

"They should have locked her up a long time ago," said Bernardo.

-And the aunt for being a criminal- I replied.

"Then the town would disappear," he replied.

Rosa rested her head on Mauricio's chest. I approached the baby, pale beneath the sallow skin he'd inherited from his mother and some farmhand from around there. He opened his eyes from time to time, and I thought he was looking at me. But Bernardo told me he was probably blind; that eye color was typical of congenital cataracts.

I picked him up and sat in a wicker rocking chair in the hallway. The moonlight illuminated the cool patio, and Lobo lay down on the floor next to us. The Ruiz sisters walked by, laughing and calling for their sister, but Rosa was undressing Dergan to put him in the shower. I watched them from the hallway, with the door open. When it was her turn to take off his pants, she stopped while Mauricio looked to the side where Bernardo was sitting, head down.

"I think I should go," she said. "I don't dare..."

Don't worry, Rosa. I'll help you.

Dergan's pants off , and together they carried him to the bathroom. I heard the shower running, and then Rosa came out. She looked at me for a moment, smiling. The baby was asleep in my arms.

"You should keep him," he said. " Take him to Buenos Aires, don't let him stay."

She was no longer referring to the baby, but to Bernardo. She wasn't thinking about the good of the town, but about the obstacle he would be for her if he stayed. Poor fool, I thought, she doesn't know that there are insurmountable obstacles, inner forces as immense as a cataclysm. Guilt has the virtue of being like bombs whose effectiveness lies in never exploding, because if it does, it's already the domain of suicide.

It must have been midnight when Bernardo came out and stood behind me, smoking. Lobo watched him with adoring eyes.

- How is Maurice?

"I'm glad you called him that; he'd like to hear it. He's feeling better; the cold shower cleared his head."

"I'm glad to see you with a close friend, Bernie. In Buenos Aires you're always alone, except for work."

He didn't answer me.

" Do you think he's going to survive?" I asked, looking at the boy.

Who knows? He'd be better off dying for the future that awaits him. He should be in a hospital, but of course we can't take him there.
- And your father talked about all this? Excuse me , I always…
"It doesn't matter. My old man knew everything, but he turned a blind eye, at least at first, when I was a kid or even before. He was very strict, at least to keep up appearances. I remember when the Espinoza father died, he said his sons killed him and buried him. There was a huge mess about all that."
- And what happened?
-One tragedy after another. A priest died, and the younger sister was burned to death, but she survived. A tragedy.
-Yes, since I arrived I feel like I'm in a Sophocles play.
The night passed, calm, with the owls hooting in the distance, Matilde's moaning fading in time with those same owls that seemed to be foretelling her future. I fell asleep with the baby in my arms. I dreamed of things I hadn't dreamed since my teenage years, when my mother had begun to plant in my mind, unwillingly, like a stubborn tradition imposed on women, perhaps as an autonomous reflex, the foolish dreams of youth: the house, the husband, and the children. I couldn't give Bernardo children, although we tried many times, but we soon gave up. My illness and his temperament weren't conducive to our notion of raising a child. I didn't think about it much, but when I did, I suffered, and that's why I avoided it. But the boy in my arms spoke to me in my dreams of an opportunity.
- Do you want us to keep him?
Bernie's voice came from the well of the cistern, I told myself. No, he was beside me, crouching and clinging to the armrest of the rocking chair, stopping its rocking motion, freezing time in an instant where the entire night and its events seemed to converge. The scent of grass, damp earth, the eucalyptus-scented wind from the fields, the very smell of dung on the cobblestones, the scent of cheap cologne drifting from the room, and the smell of the sick boy.
I think I accepted, because a moment like that doesn't come around again. But it's not right to make decisions in moments that seem outside of time, that corrode and destroy everything.
"Do you want to ?" I asked him.

He shrugged.
"We would be a family," he told me.
Then I realized that duty fulfilled was a commandment. Punishment was a sword of Damocles hanging over his life.
"You can't be on good terms with both God and the devil," I said, yielding to the cliché, the stock phrase, the popular wisdom which, properly understood, is rarely wrong. Not a single line from Milton or Shakespeare, nor the vainglory of a biblical quote or the useless boasting of philosophy.
The boy was the expiation for his sins: the dead mother, the disappointment of the father, and the obligation to cure me.
And now I was beginning to feel guilty for keeping him. Was it right for me to take on his guilt and transform it into a single burden to plant in my own soul? Guilt sometimes compels us to do wrong things, but I thought I had the opportunity to perform a single act that would wash away Bernardo's guilt. Guilt doesn't disappear; it transforms. It's the famous energy Lavoisier spoke of, though he wasn't referring to it.
The boy in my arms was a stone made of all the remorse and tragedy: Matilde's lucid idiocy, Aunt Edelmira's malice, the complicity of an entire town. A heavy stone that refused to die, even though it had been stillborn. The idiot had had a fatal moment of clarity when she tried to throw him into the cistern. But it was Bernardo who was tasked with rescuing the creature from guilt. The little monster who loathed himself, who barely breathed because his own foul air was enough to keep him alive. Guilt doesn't need to move or walk; it simply inhabits and breathes, and the breath it exhales forever contaminates the bodies it infects. And the room in which it breathes can only be cleansed by fire, which is why the Espinoza house burned down that time, the one everyone talked about in town. There are tragedies that end with tragedies, just as they say there are wars to end them.
However, guilt corrodes the spirit of the individual man: there are no men but one man.
Each one is his own fault, just as each one is his own child and his own corpse.
Bernardo had gone to bed after visiting Matilde. She had died, he said, and his aunt was weeping inconsolably. I sat there, rocking the boy. I woke from

my sleep at three in the morning, exactly. I got up from the rocking chair and peeked into the room. They were both asleep, and the dog was lying between them. It was a tender image, I told myself, almost a symbol of the future, if it weren't for the fact that the future insists on changing as soon as we imagine it.

The Three Marys shone brightly in the clear sky high above the eucalyptus trees, just like when Papa Tejada would point out those stars to me in the sky of Mataderos from the sidewalk in front of our house on summer nights.

I sat back down in the rocking chair, and the gentle rocking began again. I didn't know any lullabies; my mother had never sung one to me, nor had I ever bothered to learn them. I began to hum, however, an invented melody that was perhaps a reminiscence of some poem yet unwritten.

I covered the nameless boy with the sheet and wrapped him tightly like a bundle.

She didn't resist, she simply went to find someone else.

CASSANDRA UNCHAINED

1

Why do couples separate? There are no answers, only the individuals who formed the relationship remain. One on one side, the other on the other, in the same space, looking at each other. One opening their eyes and observing the other, while the other keeps their eyes closed, knowing they are being watched. Until it's their turn to do the same, to open their eyes and look at the seemingly asleep face of the one beside them. And all the while, both are planning the strategies for the war that is about to begin.

The face of the one we have loved is the map of the territory we will destroy, because in the recesses of the folds, in the trenches of the skin, in the bottomless wells of memory we have left pieces of our army, the pieces of the soul that are each of the days we have spent together, each word and gesture or caress and each thud of doors being hit and echoes of laughter and guffaws scattered in the universe of a house that was once a home.

Bernardo and I are enemies without planning it, like leaders of those revolutions that spring up almost spontaneously after a major economic crisis. And our unfortunate misfortune was the past, which slithers away like snakes in the desert, searching for rats in their burrows, while birds of prey circle above the dust and thistles, looking for them. Enemy upon enemy, in a chain that is also a circle, like the symbol of love. Because it is known that where there was love, there is often hatred, or at least that creature that is content

to be a minor god, a submissive helper of the other, a kind of crawler with a short snout and pronounced teeth, which calls itself resentment. And it bites, God knows, terribly.

We no longer live together, yet we can't separate either. Paradoxically, we are irreconcilable lovers. We loathe each other because we can't stop loving each other, but since we no longer love each other, what binds us is not the same feeling, but two creatures each of us has gestated in our own breasts. He, guilt, which is why he can't leave me completely, alternating days or nights in the apartment and others at his house in the village, aware that he must take care of me, that he needs to protect me, unyielding in his utopian vision of my healing. I, my despair, a new metamorphosis of the existential anguish that my father, Tejada, sowed in the few years we lived together. Sadness, when it has nowhere to escape, despairs, and despair, when it subsides, takes the form of a rodent gnawing at itself. My unwavering thoughts haunt the same apartment filled with old things: the frustration of impotence, the disappointment of hope. My apartment is my body, which is crumbling away. Bernie told me I need surgery on my leg. No matter how many daily doses of insulin I take, and how many times I navigate the treacherous waters of antibiotics, my leg is beyond saving. But I have no means of support. I write for magazines in the provinces, some independent, others tied to the government's commitments in municipalities lost in the antiquated corridors of outdated ideologies. I write like someone dreaming of the past; I don't mind fulfilling certain requirements, because they don't lead me astray or mortgage my ideals. I write and fulfill them exactly as I do when I write fiction. All these contributions, which are numerous yet represent a meager income, I owe to Braulio and Leandro, who forgo them for the sake of our friendship.

The apartment on the third floor of Sarmiento Street belongs to Bernardo Ruiz, of course. The little I contributed to the purchase was during my good times at "El Radar." But I can't leave with this leg, which is a bag of phantom worms, slowly being bred, and which will soon emerge. He wouldn't let me go, and I'm not in a position to contradict him, or rather, I feel obligated to revel in his guilt. That's why I say we're all enemies; what we call love is most often nothing more than the exploitation of each other's weaknesses. There are competitors by force, but many of us compete to see who is the weakest,

and the weak win. The strong prey on those who are not like them, but the weak prey on each other.
Leandro called me. We talked like we hadn't in ages, with hypocrisy. Sitting on the bed, scratching my leg even though I knew it hurt, I listened to the disastrous lie he told me about his work at the literary supplement, the whims of established writers and his terse accounts of political nightmares, the polite grammatical jabs that literary patrons exchanged from Belgrano to San Isidro. All writers are expert embezzlers, I once heard Beltrame say.
"And what about Bautista?" I asked him.
-Who knows, he's doing his long penance of silence, but he'll come out with some new book to excuse himself.
Then, since there were no more lies to tell, he mentioned that there was something that might interest me. I could make the most of it, he said, and draw political and social connections as he usually did. The case was trivial, like those colorful or sensationalist tidbits that Dora Cifuentes used to write in her supplement. I, however, would know how to turn any boring office worker into a gigantic, monstrous cockroach.
"God willing," I said, without believing in God. Superstitions persist; necessity makes them imperishable. I hung up, with the feeling in my fingers that the Kafkaesque allegory was about to come true. But it wasn't an office worker, of course, nor a man, but a woman, and more precisely, one who had a reputation as a witch.

When I told Bernardo, we argued. How was I going to manage on my own in La Plata? I might have to walk block after block looking for a house, and who knew who would receive me, or if they would let me stay there or if I would have to find a hotel, and who knew what time of day or night it would be. What if I had a health problem, what if my leg hurt a lot? Did I have everything I needed? Why tell him that I had already thought of all that and much more that he probably couldn't even imagine? Instead of thanking him, I looked at him bitterly, sitting on the bed with my hands between my crossed legs, while he spoke with the gestures and intonation of his father, which now emerged from the darkness of death to settle in his son, who had fought him so hard.

"I'm not an invalid yet," I told her. "And even if I were, I can still think and speak for myself."
- But what if you faint in the middle of the street, and nobody finds you for many hours, and...?
"What if I die?" I interrupted.
He left, slamming the door. I would have liked him to hug me.
In the afternoon I took the bus to Constitución and sat on the platform to wait for the 3:10 train. Coincidence, like those things we don't explain because we prefer to see the mystery of providence that spares us the effort of thinking and entertains us by drowning our neurons. The old Western film flashed in my memory: images and music, above all, because that's what cinema is, it seems to me. More than words, gestures and faces. Like opera, which is more music than words. Words belong to literature and are in books, those friends that offer a peace that is perhaps the only possible truth. The multiple truth that is one and many at the same time. All harmonizing in the same body, which sometimes fights with itself, like mine.
I waited on the platform, gazing at the high ceilings, the columns, the remnants of bygone eras transplanted to these lands that aspired to be what they could not be. Men and women who contemplate the future from the past, living in times that no longer exist. Countries that have built themselves immense, precious cells with the utopian certainty that the past would be the same as the future. Such incongruity is foolish, of course, but idealists often err on the side of foolishness when they lack a present to dazzle them and immerse them in the stillness of nothingness. Because that is what the present is: nothingness made law. The abolition of necessity. Immersion in the waters of silence. The sea is somewhat like that, which is why I like it. I should ask my cousin Leticia about it, but I don't know if I'll ever see her again.
The train was there, empty, like a dinosaur lying sedated inside the enormous hangar of a South American laboratory. I thought of Ameghino, of course, and the La Plata museum. Associations that opened the train doors to me shortly before three in the afternoon. There were few people; it would surely fill up at the following stations. I sat in one of the seats with interchangeable backrests, where you could sit facing the direction of the train or the

opposite. Facing the destination or the abandoned site. I chose to look back, who knows if because I still wanted to pass unfinished business, which is nothing more than understanding the attitudes of others, and which, in the end, are the answers to our own. But above all, I didn't want to leave my body behind, not yet. Parts of it were being left behind along the way, and I hadn't said goodbye to them.

Time passed, and the train continued its journey through urban landscapes: walls lining the sides, pedestrian bridges, level crossings with useless barriers, buildings seemingly cut off by the tracks. Then came the landscape of the province and the greater metropolitan area as we headed south, stations getting smaller and smaller, widespread poverty, houses, shops, people coming and going in the streets. Children in school uniforms walked to school with slumped shoulders, or returned home, interspersed with games. Later, the countryside and pastures, vast stretches of woodland interspersed with haphazard crops or abandoned land. We passed near old railway workshops. The stations kept coming and going, and we wouldn't be long in arriving. I think I fell asleep.

I woke to the sound of two men sitting behind me talking. They were speaking too loudly even to overcome the train's clatter. One of them, the one by the window, kept asking himself to repeat things. Was he half-deaf? Perhaps. His voice was dark, slightly hoarse, his tone skeptical, disillusioned. The other's voice, however, was pleasant, carefree, strong, and clear because he wanted to be understood. I didn't know what either of them looked like because I couldn't see them, although I formed an impression from listening to them. We women tend to talk about trivialities woven from the jolts of daily life; they're seemingly superficial conversations, like white tablecloths covering old, scratched wooden tables. Men talk about stupid things or the origin of God; there's no middle ground, and when they talk about women, they combine both aspects. They go from one idea to the other, irreconcilable, confused, and sorrowful. The women end up shrugging and saying goodbye with a kiss. The men end up flustered and awkward, hugging each other for support until the next encounter.

These two were talking as if they were alone on the train. I had a couple in front of me, completely absorbed in each other, and I paid no attention to

anything else. Across the aisle, people were reading or chatting, or simply looking out the window. One of them was asleep with his cap pulled down over his face, snoring, though the clatter of the train drowned out the noise. But the conversation behind me was clear, almost as if it were directed at me, and for that reason, I felt the need to listen.

- What's wrong with you, dude?
-Nothing.
Are you nervous about your parents?
-Something like that.
I think she must have made a dismissive gesture with one hand and then put it between her thighs with the other as if she were cold.
-Don't get worked up, that always happens when we go back to our parents' house after a long time.
-You don't know them .
-No, but I guess they're like everyone else, a pain in the ass.
He should have expected a sympathetic and friendly reaction, but he didn't get it, either because they didn't listen to him or because they ignored him. That sometimes happens with those who don't hear well; they tend to be a mystery. Few abuse their deficiency as much as they do, as if others owed them something. They don't listen, or they pretend not to . You can't see their powerlessness, you can't feel it or accurately categorize it, and those who hear well are like blind people to those who don't. My leg, on the other hand, can be smelled, seen, and felt. My powerlessness in pretending prevents me from feeling resentment, but not self-pity. They, however, breed resentment like an invisible monster that attacks from all sides.
" Look , Juan. I remember when I first went to Buenos Aires. I was just a kid, about fifteen years old. I don't know if you remember that big house near the Casas' bakery. It had a reputation. Some people said it was a brothel, but all we ever saw were dogs in the vacant lot and lots of people going in and out, mostly women. The mother and daughter lived there, and we kids from school liked the girl. She wasn't stunningly beautiful like a model, of course, and she was odd. Quiet, almost secretive. We couldn't get a word out of her about her family or what her mother did. And we made fun of her and teased her badly

many times, I have to admit. We'd follow her down the street to the house, and only when she went inside would we throw rocks at the dogs or the walls. Our parents had to pay for the windows we broke, and I won't even go into that." Once, the baker's daughter, another friend, and I decided to do an act of mercy, that's what we called it...
The speaker laughed, and perhaps covered his face with his hands, lost in that memory which must have been dear to him.
" Can you hear me ?" he asked. The other man was probably looking out the window.
- That?
Are you distracted or are you pretending ? Didn't you hear anything I told you?
-Excuse me, yes, I heard you. And what was this woman's name?
"Lidia, that was her name. She was a teenager like us, but she looked older, and sometimes younger, I don't know. Everything about that family was strange. They said her father was shot by the police, and that her mother was a fortune teller and all that. The time I was telling you about, we wanted to rescue the dogs because they said the witch was eating them. Well, it all went wrong. It's strange that you didn't hear about it, well... I know, forgive me, sometimes I forget about you. The thing is, her mother was left with lasting effects from a stroke. We never went near that house again; we were forbidden from even going near it. Later, when I went to Buenos Aires for a while, I ran into Lidia on the train. She was going to make a life for herself in the city, so to speak. I know they're innate prejudices, but that's how we were taught to think. We were sitting like you and I are now, talking, and I was looking at her, thinking about her body and what I would do to her, because I had no doubt now that she was a whore."
The one who was speaking lowered his voice and I heard him move slightly, perhaps leaning closer to the other's ear. He spoke again.
" You know , Juan. We were talking about nothing, but I felt like my balls were full, you know ? I was getting an erection and I couldn't control myself. I was watching her lips when she spoke, but I wasn't really listening. I was just imagining her breasts under her summer travel dress and the panties that barely covered her pussy. It still turns me on when I think about it."

Silence was the other's response, only the clatter of the train a pathetic reminder of the memory. Then he said:
- And what happened?
"So what was going to happen? I slept with her on the train, in the bathroom. She wasn't like other prostitutes, cheerful and demonstrative. She was quiet, even indifferent, when you just met her on the street or at school. When we were having sex, she was different, like all women, I think. We parted at Constitución station; she didn't want to go to a hotel that night or any other. She didn't want to see me anymore, and I didn't look for her again."
"But you didn't forget her, did you? That's how they are, the ones who deserve to be thought of and loved. They're not whores, Eduardo. They're women just like we men are. We were taught, even by our mothers, that they're there for us. Didn't it ever cross your mind that if we weren't here, they'd still be there? Who says they need us?"
- Are you talking about lesbianism?
I heard a weary click that coincided with my own silent one.
"Don't talk nonsense! I'm not talking about sex, but about existential meaning. How many ways does nature have to survive? That's not the issue. That girl might have seen the future..."
- Like the mother? Yes...it was probably like that, I didn't think about it at the time.
-Your brain was in the head of your dick...
The other one laughed, and I felt him move, probably putting an arm over his friend's shoulders.
-I know you pretend to be all prim and proper and intellectual, but deep down you're just like the rest of us...
- And what are we like? - he asked.
I was interested in the answer, thinking about Bernardo.
You know that lust is as fleeting as a breath, that it lasts so little time that sometimes you wonder if it's worth all the effort. But we keep thinking about that infinitesimal moment for the rest of our lives, because it's what keeps us going. Everything else, intelligence or whatever you want to call it, is the fruitless attempt to understand what's happening to us.
- What's wrong with us, Eduardo?

-The stations, Juan. We've arrived in La Plata.

The aisle began to fill up even though the train hadn't stopped. I rearranged the things in my purse, closed it, and stood up to grab my bag from the overhead compartment.
- Can I help you, miss?
Just as I turned to look at him, the train lurched to a complete stop, and I lost my balance. The man who had spoken grabbed me from behind. He was tall and thin, wearing a traveling salesman's suit, no tie, and a dark hat that revealed his light hair and cast a shadow over his blue eyes. I recognized the voice of the man named Eduardo. I glanced at the other man, who was arranging samples in two large suitcases and looked up a couple of times.
-Thank you, I appreciate it very much.
"It's nothing, luckily I caught it in time..." he said, looking at the crutch leaning against the seat.
-Don't worry, I'm used to it.
Luckily, he didn't insist. When we got off, I walked along the platform. I carried my small bag in one arm, my purse over my shoulder, and I used my crutch for support. I walked slowly, used to being careful in crowds that don't pay attention to where they're going or who they're bumping into. I didn't want to fall; above all, I shouldn't get hurt. I had boasted to Bernardo about managing on my own, and I wasn't about to return with my body and my ego bruised.
The street was getting dark. I sat down on the hard bench at a bus stop and checked my papers for the address I had to go to. It was the Cortéz's house. Leandro had told me he'd already spoken with the family. I asked him why they'd agreed; he said they were struggling financially because of the rent on the house, and the newspaper had promised them a payment. "And where did I fit in?" I asked. "Don't worry ," he'd said, "if it goes well, you'll get a job at the newspaper." Getting a job at La Prensa or La Nación was something I'd ruled out long before, and I almost cursed Leandro for rekindling my hopes. Anyway, I had nothing to lose, and there I was. Lost, I think, and even more convinced when I saw the men on the corner, talking to an elderly couple, not so old, who must have been Juan's parents—Juan, the taciturn, short man with

broad shoulders and a dark face and beard. They made an odd couple: one optimistic and carefree, but also disillusioned and as if past some disappointments; the other serious, obsessive, and brooding. One tall, one short, like a pair of movie comedians performing their routine of fights and reconciliations. They were getting into a car, but the tall one saw me before getting in, said something to the people inside, and ran over to where I was.
"Where are you going, miss? Do you want us to meet you somewhere? It's getting dark..."
I was going to refuse, but suddenly I felt helpless and tired. That man's clear eyes and splendid smile convinced me.
-Look, I don't know where this is, I don't think it's downtown, so I don't know which bus to take.
-Don't be intimidated by anything. My friend and I grew up here, and the diagonal streets hold no secrets for us.
He read the paper with the address. He looked at me suddenly, seriously.
"Excuse me for asking," she said as we walked toward the car, carrying my purse, not letting me help her with my crutch. "Are you going to visit the Cortez family?"
-It's for an interview, do you know them?
-Yes, we'll pass by because Juan's house is very close.
We got into the car. He introduced me, and I saw a look of displeasure, but nobody said anything. They all looked at each other when I mentioned the address; the silence was thick enough to cut to paper. When we arrived, the old man said:
-You can get off.
The mother looked at me, wanting to ask me something, but the old man put a hand on her shoulder and she stopped. Juan was on the sidewalk, so he came down and helped me. He looked toward the house; the street and sidewalk were already dark. I heard barking, and then I realized. The big house and the girl they had talked about was this one we were standing in front of. There was a light on the porch and in an upstairs room.
"Do you want to...?" Juan began to say.
"Let's go!" shouted the father.

The son returned to the car and drove off before I had time to say thank you or wave. The dogs, whose barking drifted from the side and back yards, continued their persistent barking. Suddenly, the front door opened and a thin girl came out. Some of the dogs ran off, while others circled behind the fence that separated them from the sidewalk—it was so low they could have jumped it, but they didn't. She placed some pots and pans on the grass. The animals paced back and forth, alternating between eating and barking. She glanced at me, and I went to the fence, watching the dogs' behavior. She was far away, at the door, perhaps fifteen meters away, and I wasn't sure if she could hear me over all the barking and the clatter of overturned pots.

- Is Mrs. Cortez there?

- Who is looking for her?

-Cecilia Taboada, for the interview.

Then she went inside for a moment and turned on the lights. The driveway was made of flagstones surrounded by grass and dog feces. The girl stood serious and still where she was, by the door. She saw me struggle to climb the five steps, dodging the dogs that watched and sniffed at me, making it difficult for me to pass. Finally, standing before her, I said:

I apologize for the late hour; I believe Mr. Mallea has already spoken with the lady about my accommodation. I apologize, but she will have already realized my difficulties.

"Don't get upset, my dear," said a voice from the darkness of the inner room. "Lidia, don't just stand there and help the young lady with her things."

So that was Lidia, the girl they were talking about on the train. But if she was a girl, she couldn't be more than thirteen, fourteen at most. It had to be someone else, without a doubt.

We went inside, her carrying my purse, while I held the hand of the woman in the wheelchair. She was old and young at the same time. She looked no more than forty-five, perhaps, but she was gaunt and thin, her skin wrinkled and her makeup more macabre than anything else. The room I entered, now brightly lit, was bare of furniture. I thought of Graciela's living room, so full of knick-knacks, and this one seemed deserted. I couldn't stop looking around; there weren't even any paintings. Just a table and two chairs. And a wardrobe so heavy it seemed embedded in the floor and walls.

-My daughter will show you the room after she has eaten something; we prepared a light dinner for you. The gentleman already told me that you are diabetic.

Thank you, Leandro, I thought, as always when they were ahead of me in announcing my disabilities and the care that should be taken with me; however, everyone was raising the walls of prejudice they were trying to avoid even higher.

I looked at the stairs; I would have appreciated some help with that. But the woman didn't seem to notice, perhaps because she was asleep downstairs. The girl returned and disappeared into the back. A while later, she brought a tablecloth and a plate of food: a somber tomato soup, a loaf of bread, and a glass of water.

"Excuse me, miss, but we don't have many resources. The gentleman has probably already explained our situation to you."

"Yes, he explained it to me," I said, sitting down and tasting the soup, bland and without salt, but finally something for my austere day of travel. "I hope you don't mind my presence; I understand that these notes are annoying."

"Yes, for those of us who aren't famous, they're annoying, except for those seeking their fifteen minutes of fame on television or in the newspapers. But you know, Mr. Leandro has known us forever, since we were young, and he's like a father to us, you could say; he knows us all. He's everywhere, even if you can't see him, like a creator god, so I can't be angry with him. He provides us with everything, even though he can be quite cruel to us from time to time."

-I don't quite understand...if you mean that he writes.

That's what I mean, and that sometimes she exaggerates. But it doesn't matter. You're different, you're a woman, and we'll get along wonderfully, won't we, Lidia?

"Yes, Mom," she answered, standing beside her, her hands behind her back, moving them, and even though I couldn't see her, I could guess the gestures she must be making. Her face was white and pale, her eyes as dark as her mother's. At times, I thought I was seeing one in the other, their faces superimposed: the daughter in the chair and the mother standing. Lidia must have been the spitting image of her mother at that age. How old were they?

"Me?" the girl asked.
-Don't be stupid and don't make people repeat themselves, we have plenty of deaf people.
I stopped halfway with the spoon, which gave up trying to continue. I hadn't asked anything, at least not out loud, and that reference to deafness reminded me of the man on the train.
-I'm nineteen, miss.
I almost laughed, but I avoided it by pretending to cough, which no one believed.
-Yes, he's still very young.
-She looks like a little girl…
"She's a child, of course," said the mother, stroking Lidia's arm, but barely touching her. "She's been up to some mischief, but she's learning."
I didn't want to continue; I felt disoriented in time and space. Perhaps it was my blood sugar levels and the pre-crisis of another collapse that Bernardo wouldn't forgive me for, and I even less so.
-I'm going to sleep, I'm very tired.
Lidia accompanied me up the stairs. I noticed she was watching me without resentment, but with the weariness of a ritual that bored her. Since when had she been caring for her invalid mother? And as I climbed the stairs, I heard the creaking of the steps.
-Sorry for all the noise, it's the crutches.
From below, without expecting me to have heard her, the mother said:
-Don't get worked up, the house is complaining because it's a grumpy old woman who doesn't like strangers.

2

In the morning I woke up with my biological clock working perfectly, without any jolts or worries. An alarm made me open my eyes at exactly eight. “What a load of crap,” was my only thought, more of a disappointment than true

regret or weariness of existence, states I had grown accustomed to living with as if with a husband I could never get rid of, states in which I went to bed and woke up, seeing the face of death made up like a soap opera actress beside me in bed, showing me the positions of eternity as if it were teaching me a Kamasutra so ridiculous it was like watching two bones clash and break. The result of sex is not life but the dust of nothingness that settles in the room of memory like stains of pleasure forming oases where we think we see gateways to the universe, and with nothing more than flat, hard, and irrevocable stains, like the exposed bricks on cemetery walls.

But that morning, like every other, what had been little more than a disappointment, festered into sorrow and lingered in the bathroom of the old house, with its creaking floorboards and doors that didn't quite close. Neither the bedroom door nor the bathroom door, nor the windows. Frames barely ajar, millimeters of difference, the same millimeters by which the difference between life and death is measured: the threshold of space so uncertain that it cannot be seen, cannot be measured, yet is nevertheless calculated with the precise measure not of instinct, which is too attached to the biological, but of premonition.

And this word reached me from downstairs, from the ground floor. How do I know? Simply because it appeared in the bathroom doorway, which opened because, as I said, I hadn't been able to close it, revealing María Cortéz. At first, I thought it was her daughter: she looked young, standing calmly in a green house dress that she wore with elegance because her body was slender and her curves insisted on remaining. She was the same one I had seen in a wheelchair with her face painted, her voice hoarse, issuing imperious orders. But the one watching me while I combed my hair after brushing my teeth, although she was the same age, around those forty-five years that are often mentioned when boundaries are uncertain, wasn't wearing makeup, she spoke in a low, calm voice, as if carefully considering each of her sentences, and she was still beautiful, with light brown hair in soft waves that played around her ears. Her hands were behind her back, and I don't know what she was doing with them (those things always worried me, as I worry about what I can't see).

-Come and have breakfast, Cecilia.

We went down the stairs together. She was unfazed, one step after another in her low heels, while I clattered along on my crutches. I frowned, embarrassed. She gave me a smile that grew into a short laugh.
Last night she made me angry, the house, I mean, she too, like us, has her circadian rhythms. We get older and we get irritable, we yell, we break things, we get angry with the ones we love most, and we're even capable of anything. You understand that, don't you?
Did you inject your insulin this morning?
I shook my head. In the kitchen, we sat down at the table where Lidia placed three old china cups, a plate of sugar cubes, and a teapot containing coffee. Then she brought out a metal box with an advertisement for a sweet bread from the 1950s, maybe, where they kept honey cookies. They helped me give myself the injection. It didn't impress them.
"Just half a lump of sugar or a honey biscuit for you," she would say, attending to me as if I were a queen or an invalid. "I know what you're thinking, but we have to take care of you. You're our last resort."
She didn't need to tell me that saving the house depended on the outcome of the interview. The newspaper had probably already agreed to a minimum, but she seemed to be hiding something with her veiled smile and the intense attention she was giving me.
"We can start the interview after breakfast, if that's alright with you. Where would you like to sit? Outside, in the dog yard? But no, they might accidentally hurt you, and above all..." I should mention the smell of the wound on my foot. "The living room would be better. There's a silence there after midday that sometimes makes me think the house is asleep, although I know, after all these years, that it's just thinking up new ways to annoy us."
That was my first question.
- And why do you want to stay in a house that hates you? You seem to be constantly moving, because there's nothing but the bare essentials, like built-in furniture, and you'd nail the chairs down if you could.
She burst out laughing, a loud, stammering laugh coming on her lips. When she finally calmed down, she said to me:
"You're one of us, no doubt. But let me draw a comparison. You know about medicine, of course, and you know that damaged tissue tends to harden and

adhere to its surroundings. Scars, cysts, or whatever you want to call them, are the least frightening consequences of something that could have killed us. The house is like the body. Pablo, my husband, spent months nailing the furniture and boards to try to stop them from moving, and all he managed to do was make them creak and groan. Almost everything is stuck to the walls or the floor, except for the small, useless, unavoidable things—these cups, for example, or a toothbrush. And we, of course, will eventually stop moving."
-I understand the psychology of the house. But, with that logic, aren't you afraid when you sleep?
"The tacit contract is different from the one we have in writing with the owner and in the hands of a notary. We keep her alive"—and he gestured with his hand, pointing to the ceilings and walls—"with what she likes, and in return she leaves us in peace, except for the old woman's groans, which we've grown accustomed to."
-So that's why you work as a fortune teller, then.
Maria shrugged and offered me the other half of the sugar cube as if rewarding a clever dog. Lidia had sat down almost next to her mother, and they looked so alike that I thought their faces had been superimposed. The mother's sudden rejuvenation still unsettled me, but I suspected it was an act she often put on for strangers or her clients, adapting her appearance to the mansion's decor. An old hag fit a haunted house. That would make a good title for the article, I thought.
We went out into the patio. The morning was gloomy, the sky shrouded in gray, and a drizzle filled my lungs with a damp mist that I thought was seeping into my veins and intensifying the smell of my wound. The dogs—ten, fifteen, twenty—came running as soon as I stepped onto the wooden floor behind the door. A shout from Maria was enough to make them simply stop and sniff me. They didn't jump on us, although they were all nervous, holding back.
- That's enough! Get out! I wanted you to know she's a friend, so you won't bother her anymore. Let's go inside.
We went into the living room and sat down in two chairs by the unlit fireplace. Outside, we could hear the sounds of the city: car horns, bus engines,

children shouting, and the occasional crash with a metallic clang that clashed with the sound of the wood inside.
- And why these noises?
He waited until I took my notebook out of my pants pocket.
-I already told you, the house is a living body, like all houses, don't you think? Especially those that are very old and were built with a purpose, for someone or for a particular family , not like those nowadays that they make to sell to anyone, like a screw factory makes screws, all the same, and even these are different!
- Who built it?
"I don't know, I don't even know what happened. I see the future, Cecilia, not the past. The past comes to me through clues, like it does to everyone, and it suggests things to me, like it does to everyone. I only know my own past, and that's all, of course. There are things that are forgotten, others that people think they remember. What is my past in this house was simply the future when Pablo and I first arrived. I know the house was sick, with all those noises that at first frightened me, while at first they made Pablo suffer like cruel jokes. How can I explain the difference? They are just sensations that later become convictions. As I was saying, at first I was afraid of them, because I myself didn't fully understand my own capabilities, if I can call them that, those that were curses and torments of my spirit, and which over time I learned to tame, like those dogs, you understand?"
I nodded. He was talking about things as ethereal as my overactive imagination, which I sometimes enjoy more than reality.
“Pablo was tormented because he felt guilty. That’s the problem with men; they let themselves be overwhelmed by this sense of duty that they can’t fulfill. And the Catholic upbringing he received from his grandparents in Tandil didn’t help him at all. We met in Mar de Ajó. He was doing construction work, and I had left my parents’ house in Madariaga and was working as a maid for the summer tourists. Pablo’s contractor was Octavio Rinaldi…” She paused to confirm that I should write down the name. “He was the only one who hired him there on the coast because Pablo had done some time in jail. He was so grateful to the guy that he showered him with praise. Thanks to that, we were able to rent an apartment, and I got pregnant. I

wasn’t even three months along when I found out about the robbery. The guy had tricked him into getting another job at a shady finance company in Mar Chiquita. But the people at the finance company had also swindled a lot of people, and they had more money than they were declaring.” It was a whole network that included the provincial police, who turned a blind eye, and the local mayors. That's what I read in the newspapers after the robbery. Pablo told me we had to leave. Rinaldi had told him that a third partner had taken more than half of what was stolen. He was furious and threatened to kill him when he found him, but in the meantime, Pablo, poor devil, a laborer's apprentice turned laborer for the poor, had to hide. When he found out anything, he'd let me know. Do you know where we ended up? Here we are, in this city of La Plata, which, because it's big, we thought we'd go unnoticed, but it's a den of thieves where Rinaldi and the others, Pablo's supposed partners, were born. All of them, however many there were, took advantage of him. Pablo didn't finish sixth grade, Cecilia, and he could barely read the signs on the streets or in the offices. In prison they treated him worse than a dog, and when we met on the beach, he told me the sea was like another wall of his prison. He thought about killing himself once. Yes, I can see it in his face now, that all men are the same, that Pablo wanted to move me by playing the victim. That I loved him and couldn't see reality. Let me tell you something: I did see reality because I saw glimpses of the future. That's what I saw, or rather, heard in this house. The gunshots began to overwhelm me. I heard them in the street, and in here, the house warned me with its rather unsubtle form. Then, what for me was incomprehensible horror turned into absolute guilt: I had to warn Pablo about what was coming. Little by little, I witnessed how the guilt he felt at first, those noises that to him were like the groans of Christ on the cross, transformed into horror, until it molded his face into that expression with which I saw him die. The horror of seeing the betrayal of the woman he loved with the same courage as the betrayal of other men.

- Are you saying that you knew your associates were coming to kill you?

"No, no! You don't know anything about what happened. It wasn't like that, I'm going to tell you. I didn't know who they were, I only heard the gunshots from the future. How could I tell him and warn him? At that time, he didn't

know much about my torment because I kept it hidden from him. I preferred to be seen as crazy, and that's what most people thought. Pablo only believed, at least a little, in what he called my dreams, because I used that word to disguise what I didn't understand, what had been happening to me since I was a child in the fields of Madariaga, where they buried unknown dead so many times, always, whether in the 1930s during the dictatorship, or with Perón later, and later in the mass graves where the military makes the dead disappear. I heard, even before that had happened, the moans of the dead as if they had been buried alive. Can you imagine an eight-year-old girl, with a vivid imagination and on top of that, with a capacity that surpassed her understanding? How much I suffered, you can't imagine." I told my parents, a chicken farmer and a schoolteacher, what was happening to me, and they looked at each other as if lamenting that the only daughter they could have had was like my great-aunt, locked away in an asylum until she died. The one who saw shadows on the walls and monsters in her soup bowls, the one who shaved her head to make it look like a crystal ball. Then one day I grabbed a shovel and went out very early to dig up the dead. They found me passed out from exhaustion in the middle of a summer afternoon next to a bunch of pits where worms and beetles were crawling out, nothing else. They took me out of school and put me to work in the fields with the poultry. When I was fourteen, I left home, alone. I worked as a maid, and a couple of men supported me for a few months, one for a few months, then the other for a few months. I wasn't a prostitute, no, I was just a woman. The images that tormented me began to sow seeds of peace in my mind. Only what I loved caused me anguish; I no longer loved those men. That's why, when I met Pablo, I couldn't tell him what I sensed. I should have; perhaps I could have prevented that future turn. It's absurd for someone like me, but I still think about it: forms are merely forms; the essence of an object doesn't determine the form in which it's contained. That's what the metaphors in dreams tell me, the symbols that speak to me. Words are interchangeable; they are nothing more than forms, but the concept doesn't change.

-Kant said something like that in his premises.

"So? Then you don't need to be a philosopher to interpret it. Fortune tellers aren't infallible, though. When we don't evade the future, we evade the

present. This body and this flesh that defines us condemns us, you know that well, Cecilia. We are selfish by nature; the body fears pain. And my pain was leaving this house, which, being my burden, was my womb. How to explain it to you? Telling Pablo they were going to kill him was the same as asking us to leave. And I couldn't leave the house where I had finally found my peace. You'll ask me: peace? And I'll answer: the fading away that afternoon in Madariaga among the wells was the most peaceful afternoon of my life. I never told anyone, but before falling asleep for hours, the specters touched me as they were released. Each one said goodbye with a light touch, like the kiss of a fly."

It was two in the afternoon, the time when many people take up their siesta. How boring, my God, I just couldn't get used to it; it seemed like wasting precious time. I would start typing my notes. In my room, there was an old Remington typewriter that needed a few drops of oil to make it run like a beautiful deer through the forest of letters. At least it would mask, for a long while, the noises of the house, which were notable neither for their persistent tenacity nor for their originality, although sometimes the latter appeared in the form of a strange sound that wasn't the creaking of wood, but rather a kind of wheezing, like a boy with asthma, or rather, someone who couldn't hold his breath much longer.

But my plans for the afternoon were disrupted when Juan, the one from the train, appeared. He was the one Lidia's mother had been referring to the night before when she spoke about the visits from the deaf. Juan, of course, wasn't entirely deaf, but he had trouble hearing long sentences or whispers. He entered the living room when Lidia opened the front door for him, without him ringing the bell. She must have been expecting him, because when they arrived together, not holding hands, but tacitly united, María jumped, getting up from her chair, and saying:

- What did I tell you, Lidia? I don't want to see him anymore, and you keep rubbing it in my face.

But Lidia had taken advantage of my presence, a visit they needed to make a good impression on, or at least the opportune witness to what she needed to be known. Because they both had different reasons for wanting me there. The mother wanted the money to keep the house, perhaps also to settle a long-

held resentment, and the daughter wanted to defend the only thing she believed could save her from the fate that was already ingrained in her very being, so that removing it was like amputating herself.
"Excuse me, Cecilia," my mother said, adopting the sarcastic, nagging tone of a backwoods woman. "As you can see, this boy isn't welcome here. His father killed my Pablo, and can you believe it? My Lidia keeps bringing him along like he's her boyfriend."
"He's my husband," said the girl, who sounded like a thirteen-year-old talking about marriage.
- Don't talk nonsense! The marriage was annulled a long time ago, but it seems neither of them wants to acknowledge it.
"I'm leaving," I said, but then Juan spoke, as if clinging to me like a life preserver.
-We already know each other, miss, do you remember the train?
-Of course I remember, it's just that I don't want to get involved in family matters.
“There are no such things, Cecilia,” said the mother. “It’s all over between them. Lidia and he got married as teenagers, despite what she already knew about the Rinaldi family. Because this idiot who doesn’t listen to anything, or pretends not to listen because it doesn’t suit him, is the son of Octavio Rinaldi, my husband’s business partner I mentioned, who’s still free because he betrayed Pablo.”
Lidia and Juan made the gestures of weariness they always made when they heard the same thing over the years. They went out to the patio; the dogs barked around Juan, but at a brief command from Lidia, they fell silent and sat down around them.
Maria watched from the living room, helpless and tearful.
"I can't talk to you about that now," she said. "We'll leave it for another time. I have work at five."
I went to the kitchen and looked for something to eat in the refrigerator. Cold noodles, leftovers from a chard quiche, a piece of meatloaf. Neither of them bothered to eat lunch or offer me anything; the attentiveness of breakfast had vanished, replaced by the dullness and the feeling of aging that was gradually coloring the house and the sky of La Plata. The early afternoon shadow

darkened the kitchen. I heard the doorbell ring a couple of times, and the scraping of the wheelchair toward the front door and then back toward the living room, followed by an uncertain tap of heels, which was repeated several times until nearly nine o'clock at night. Whispers, a few soft, muffled cries from a woman, mingled with the dimness of the house.

Juan and Lidia were still in the patio, sitting in two rocking chairs. The dogs lay there, like worshippers of the pagan goddess who had at her side the concubine whom the subjects detested but tolerated at their mistress's command. During those hours I spent in the kitchen, writing on scraps of paper I found in the drawers, I overheard fragments of their conversation, which reached me with the acrid smell of something old and cloistered, as if they were both trying to preserve their love like someone trying to preserve a rose inside a book. After a long time, the flower will still be there, whole like a museum piece that is forbidden to touch, at the risk of it crumbling to pieces and turning to ash.

At about eight o'clock at night they entered and Lidia turned on the lights.

- What are you doing in the dark, and writing? You're going to hurt your eyes, miss.

My eyesight is already used to it, and diabetes hasn't affected it yet. I hope I don't go blind before I die.

I don't know why I made that horrifyingly pessimistic and deathly comment. Was the house starting to know me and dictating it to me? Maybe Maria was right, the walls were part of a body with a life of its own, and where was the brain?

-I'm going to prepare dinner, Mom is about to finish her appointments. We eat dinner late.

Juan sat down and put his elbows on the table.

"Are you staying?" I asked him, making sure to speak loudly and directly to him.

-No, I'm just taking advantage of the last few minutes, that's all.

-They have few opportunities to see each other, don't they?

- And what do you think? With my job, I only come when I'm assigned to the area.

-So they got married...

Lidia had her back to us, opening jars, cutting vegetables, her attention focused on the kitchen and her gaze on the old tiles, but she was listening nonetheless.
-My parents separated us because it wasn't legal, they said, we were both boys.
-I thought it was Maria…
“My mother…” Lidia said from her spot by the kitchen counter, wearing a thirty-year-old apron that made her look even older, almost like her lover’s mother. That house had a way of aging women at certain times of day. But the man remained young, and only his resentment aged his soul. “…she does what’s best for her, and often she doesn’t even know what that is. Even if she protested, I think she would have given in to our marriage in the end, because what she wants is to be left alone. Mama goes out of her way to be left in peace in this house; it’s her refuge, the one that sustains her. As you can see, she protested when Juan came, but in the end, she resigns herself.”
Two lovers who cherish every minute, the slow, shadowy sunsets on a dreary street in La Plata. Cornered, hoping to go unnoticed for as long as they can, which is never long, because there's always someone out there, lurking.
- Can I ask you something, Juan?
-Yes, miss. Is it for the interview? Lidia already told me…
-It's about your father's role in the robbery. Look, don't take it the wrong way, that's old news and the statute of limitations has expired.
He got flustered and stood up. Yes, he had clearly taken it badly.
Ask him, if he's up for it. I have to go, they're waiting for me at home.
He left without saying goodbye to anyone.
I saw Lidia with a worried, distant look, fixed on the front door. She was holding a knife and cutting a carrot on a wooden board . I apologized.
"Just ask. That's why you came. We still live here, and nothing changes. The father is worse than my mother, in case you want to take note. The old man is a beast. He's an alcoholic, but that's not the problem. He once beat Juan so hard he was deaf, and the mother… how can I put it? She's a rat who goes along with the old man's actions, hides in her rat hole when she sees him being violent, and comes out to protect him when he's accused. Juan grew up

between those two. He has a soul of glass that makes everything transparent, but it's a glass that doesn't break..."
"There are tempered glass panes, Lidia, that are exposed to everything for years and years, and one day they shatter..."
That night the three of us had dinner. Lidia was like the housewife, going from the counter to the table bringing the dishes. Maria, in her wheelchair, played the role of the old witch. I was silent, bringing my fork to my mouth with noodles stained by a bland meat sauce. The dogs barked, waiting their turn.
"Now," said Maria, placing her silverware on the empty plate. Lidia got up and went out to feed the animals.
"What do they give them?" I asked.
The old woman rested her elbows on the chair, picking her teeth with a toothpick. How many women were in that house? A multitude I had yet to meet.
"His own shit," he replied.
I didn't know whether to let myself laugh. Noticing this, she said:
-It's no joke. Dried dung and the bones of those who die.
- Are you serious?
- What? Are you going to report me like the neighbors did? They already did that and it didn't do them any good. Do you think we can live on what I earn playing soccer? What do you think you ate, dear?
My eyes filled with tears I refused to let out. I swallowed the anger and humiliation. I got up and made as much noise as I could with my crutches all the way to my room. The hallway and the stairs became cauldrons of thunder. I would rival the house in scandal and ignominy; the fight didn't intimidate me. The old woman must be pleased, probably; she had already squeezed me tight enough to bring out the worst in me. Outside, the girl threw the remains of the dead to the dogs, and that's how she learned to be a woman in that house, where witches were legion.

3

My second morning in the house, I woke up late. I thought I heard knocks on the door several times, but half-asleep, I ignored them. I hadn't slept well because of the argument the night before. I went to the bathroom without closing the door, and as soon as I got up from the toilet, I saw Lidia, leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed. I don't know if I described her before. She was thin but scrawny, with a gaunt face, yet beautiful because of her defined features and those high cheekbones so prized in haute couture models. Her hair was long, reaching below her shoulders, and always loose, light brown with soft, natural curls at the ends. Her green eyes glared at me with malice.

- Are you going down for breakfast?

I wondered what that tone meant, and even the lack of privacy, but in her there was nothing more than annoyance at the times she had to go upstairs to warn me, as if I had simply caused her extra work.

"I'm coming," I said, and stood in front of the mirror, washing my face and combing my hair. She kept looking at me, waiting. And I realized that this was her hostile way of wanting to talk, because perhaps she didn't know any other way.

-Tell me a little bit, don't you work , don't you study ?

- Don't you think I work?

-You know what I mean, earning your own living. Did you finish high school?

She shrugged and hid her face with her hair.

-I went to Buenos Aires a few years ago. You know, to get away from Mom.

- And what did you do?

-I cleaned houses, bars, they made me a prostitute, but the men didn't like it, I looked too young, and they were afraid of the police who raided places from time to time.

"You were lucky," I said. I brushed my teeth and took her hand to sit us down on the bed. "And why did you come back?"

"Because of Juan. He looked for me all over the city when there was that whole mess with the annulment. I hated my mother, I didn't want to be like her, but..."

-Then you came back and dedicated yourself to taking care of her.
-I have no alternatives.
- And what about Juan?
"Nothing, I suppose. We spend time together. It's good for him to come see me, even though it hurts to give him false hope. No man is good enough for Mom; she hates them all because none of them are like my father. When he comes to the city, he has to stay at her house because otherwise his parents get angry, and he comes here secretly, although I imagine they already know."
- And what do you think of your mom's job?
She looked at me in surprise, as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. And she smiled for the first time.
"It's not a job, miss. It's a wonderful gift. Don't you believe that?"
-I find it hard to admit, my mother was a complete skeptic, and my father a Catholic.
-Then my mother will convince her.
-You admire her , it seems to me.
"That's the only good thing about her, what makes her special. She's not a good woman, she's not a good mother, I know all that. But she's a prophetess... And the bad thing is that the people in the neighborhood hate her because they don't want to hear what she wants to know. And my mother doesn't want to say what they don't ask her about so they won't get scared and leave her. However, she has so many things to say, like when Dad died..."
-She already told me, but now everyone knows her, and she found a way to make a living from it.
- Bah! For what he charges...
We went downstairs for breakfast. The table was untouched, the coffee cold, and the toast burnt. We scraped it with a knife and spread it with jam. María was in her office, reading, Lidia told me. She helped me with my insulin like a professional nurse.
"She's finally up," said Maria, entering the kitchen with the same rejuvenated look as the morning before. "Lidia, take care of the upstairs, then clean the dog yard."
We went to the living room.

Isn't that too much work for her alone?
"And how do you expect us to pay a servant? Or are you talking about me? I did the same thing at your age and afterward, until I met Paul. He promised me I'd live like a queen, and then they killed him."
-She clings to fictions that don't put food on her table, Maria.
"Fictions, as he calls them, nourish the soul, and it is the soul that sustains the skeleton and the flesh. In short, whatever the case, we're not starving to death..."
"I know," I said, thinking about the dogs.
There are always those who want to know about death, but not so much their own, but rather the death of others. They're the ones who pay the most, and that's enough to live on…
- How did you find out that it was Rinaldi who betrayed your husband?
Maria settled into her chair, put her hands on her knees, and sighed.
"That was long after the shooting, when the kids got married… How awful, how stupid! They thought that marriage would be valid, even though they'd consummated it, which they'd already done before getting married, of course. They were just silly teenagers who wanted to be independent from their parents. I understand it with Juan Rinaldi; his father is a violent drunk and his mother a witch, a wicked one, of course. But I couldn't believe it of my Lidia, to whom I dedicated my life after her father's death."
"Maybe he spent too much time on his guilt," I said.
The midday honking and the shouts of the children leaving or entering the surrounding schools provided an unsuitable setting for conversation, as did the intense light coming from the main window, which had no curtains, as was the case throughout the house.
“A broad knowledge of psychology is never a bad thing for a journalist, I like that,” she replied. “I know my flaws, but above all, my mistakes, and I never found anything to fix the past. The future, Cecilia, may be dreadful, but its beauty lies in the fact that it hasn’t arrived yet.”
The light had become iridescent and dazzling at midday. Perhaps it was the silvery reflection on the bumpers of cars or trucks, but the house had lost its gloomy appearance. Maria knew I was thinking about that when she saw me

lift my head and look toward the window and the ceiling. There were no cobwebs on the high ceilings, and the wooden floorboards had fallen silent. It's the only time of day the house doesn't speak, as if it were observing a minute of silence for Pablo. For me, it's torture, because it reminds me of what I could have prevented, but the light is splendid, and sometimes he visits me, or rather, I hear his voice like I used to hear the gunshots that killed him.
"Tell me about the partners and the money." I laid my notebook on my lap. My ailing leg throbbed with pain, but I didn't care. I'd mixed a little of that Cuban elixir González had sold me with the insulin.
Rinaldi was the one who spilled the beans one day when he got too drunk. It was just a few years ago, when the guys got together. Up until then, I didn't know why the police were looking for him and not the others. I didn't know their names; I found them out over time, and everything fell into place perfectly. It was a plan that went wrong from the start because the partners were sons of bitches, except for Pablo, who was a fool . That's why Juan resents his parents so much, not because he cared about my husband, but because of Lidia, of course.
-They told me that the cause of his deafness was some blows...
"Yes, besides that, of course, I'd already forgotten. But I don't feel sorry about that, you know? Deaf people, like blind people, have an exquisite capacity to perceive other things. Their inner life is much richer."
- So why doesn't he want me to get back together with Lidia?
"Because there are some things that can't be forgiven. Call it a vendetta, for my Italian ancestors, or whatever you like. But Juan is too dark for my Lidia. Darknesses don't mix, I don't know if you understand, Cecilia. Light and shadow are the necessary pair for life and death. Complete darkness is sterile, and it doesn't even give rise to the necessary death."
I was left thinking. I didn't understand anything, of course, and she knew it. But I was also aware that there was nothing to understand, only to perceive. That whole house was an entity of perception, and now I understood the reason for María Cortez's loyalty to that mansion. They were one.
Rinaldi was so furious that his son had fallen in with a family of crazy whores, as he called us, that he let loose. He boasted about having Pablo killed, which

wasn't difficult because the cops were in on it too. He'd told him to come to La Plata, that he'd protect him there until he found Méndez.

- And who was that?

Bruno Méndez was the third partner in the robbery. He owned a car dealership and sometimes worked with the finance company, so he knew about the fraud. Everyone considered him a good guy—calm, intelligent, always well-dressed, and very handsome. He was married with children, but everyone knew of his affairs, the most famous of which was with a schoolteacher or a professor, I don't know. The thing is, most people felt sorry for him, especially the women. You see, when he was young, an engine fell on him, and they had to amputate his leg. You know how those things go. Anyway, Méndez kept all the money, or at least most of it, hid it, and disappeared for a long time.

- How much did they steal?

"Sixteen million pesos, can you believe it? It was a lot, a lot of money. So Rinaldi went looking for Méndez, but since he knew it was very likely he wouldn't find him, just in case he got rid of Pablo. Because half of a little is always something, isn't it? A few months after all that, I don't remember exactly, but I think it was the same year, they found Méndez dead in his workshop. His head was smashed in by a large, heavy wrench. The police investigated, but it was all very superficial, of course. Officially, they talked about a robbery or some kind of business revenge because it was known that Méndez was involved with the chop shops and all that. Later, something happened that many people linked to Méndez's death. The teacher I mentioned earlier, the one who was known to be his lover, was hit by a car." They were some boys, the sons of Marcelo Benítez, owner of several paper mills, a very wealthy man who had recently had to close a couple due to the economic situation during Illia's presidency. One of his warehouses caught fire, and there were rumors that it was arson. The insurance company denied the claim, it seems, and people were already saying he was going to go bankrupt. So everyone connected that to the robbery at the finance company. Furthermore, the military was putting pressure on the government, and Onganía soon appeared on the scene.

-Wait a minute, Maria. Let's take this one step at a time. She was telling me about the teacher…
"Oh, yes. The boys were spoiled brats, and it was said that they ran over Miss Inés because she had made them repeat a whole year of high school. They ended up breaking her leg, and she was in the hospital for more than a week. But it turns out that one day she died."
- Because of the injuries?
They said yes, but those who visited her said she was fine, except for her broken leg. The journalists, who always speculate a lot but never settle anything, turned the teacher's death into a macabre scene. They say they heard her scream and flail her arms in the dark of the clinic room as if she were defending herself against a ghost, and that they heard her confess and beg forgiveness from this so-called ghost. Had she killed Bruno Méndez? That's what they said, out of spite. Méndez had a family, and she knew it, of course, but who knows what stories had formed in her head? Did he promise to leave her? I don't think so. Did he cheat on her with other lovers? Maybe. Then came the more realistic versions, but never verified. The most credible version was that she had killed him, and that someone else then killed her.
- And why, if she was just a teacher?
"That's precisely why, Cecilia. Benítez, who watched his entire paper empire, his European vacations, his cars, his beach houses, and everything else he owned slowly vanish, couldn't let a mere schoolteacher have cost him sixteen million pesos. Because when she killed Méndez, she threw away any chance of finding out where Bruno had hidden the money. Imagine, Benítez must have expected to keep more than fifty percent, because with Pablo gone and Méndez gone, of course, he could manipulate Rinaldi as he pleased—Rinaldi, who is violent but incredibly intelligent."
-But they're all just conjectures, aren't they?
"Of course, but most truths are like that. You, my dear, should know that. There isn't just one truth. And when we delude ourselves into thinking we've found the most plausible version, we see that it's built from a vast number of clues, most of which can't be verified—perhaps even assumptions themselves. And with these pieces, one can easily assemble various forms, all possible, and therefore, disconcerting."

Truth is more perplexing than fantasy, without a doubt. Imagination uses the elements that reality provides and is always the result of poetic deliberation: the creator who sets out to think is a worker. But who constructs reality? Where is the creator who assembles the elements—multiple, unknown, and immensely deceptive in their determination? How can we find the end of the skein if the threads that make it up are countless?

That afternoon, or the ones that followed, were a kind of leisurely stroll through the streets of La Plata. I started by walking around the block, getting to know the neighborhood. An old bakery with the typical name of "La Colonial," an old bar or tavern where a man in a gray apron waited for his regulars: laborers, office workers, wives waiting for their husbands outside the factories. The children were leaving school in the mid-afternoon, and the teachers walked by talking and complaining, but with weary smiles of discontent painted on their faces, their hands calloused from books and watercolors, their ankles swollen from low-heeled shoes. The children looked at me curiously because of my crutches; some of them laughed.
That afternoon Juan came over, and when I told him how tired I was of going any farther, he offered to drive me around. We drove in silence, but I occasionally asked for directions. A pharmacy opened its tall metal doors, adorned with dull bronze ornamentation. A man named Valverde owned it, he told me, with a dismissive click of his finger. We passed a small hotel, narrow-fronted and no more than three stories high. Hotel Ansaldi, he mentioned, almost as if spitting out the name. He clearly didn't have a very high opinion of the neighborhood, and I asked him about it.
"What do you want me to explain? Everyone here is just like everywhere else. You can find a cross-section of the world within four blocks. Shall we go back?"
I looked at my watch; it was six in the evening. Maria had two or three hours left with her appointments.
-If you're not anxious to get back with Lidia, I'd like to have a chat with you.
He glanced at me quickly and turned his gaze back to the cobblestone street. The Fiat we were in belonged to his father, he'd told me. For a moment I saw

him looking worried, but he gave a fleeting start and clicked his tongue, sending everything to hell, and said:
-Let's go to Santos's, it's the closest place just in case…
-Okay, don't worry, if you don't want to…
-It's not that I don't want to, it's what I have to do.
Those afternoon hours, those days he spent in the city, were stolen from his family. He was a useless member because of the rigidity of the entire family structure. He gave the impression of a broken piece, not one of those removed from a cog or an assembled structure, whose removal can affect the functioning of the whole. That, it seems to me, was his frustration, or his irresolvable conflict: to be a piece of cement that has no more importance in the structure of which it is a part than any other piece. But outside of it, he was nothing either, simply a piece of cement that would slowly crumble with time: the children who would kick the rubble, the indifferent blows of pedestrians, or the action of the rain. Those stolen hours with Lidia, and I presume during his work in Buenos Aires or the provinces, gave him the illusion of *perpetuity. mobile* , which however would gradually stop until the rubble it carried on its chest was nothing more than dust scattered in the air.
We parked right in front of the bar where the man I'd seen before was standing, wearing a gray apron and carrying a white dish towel in one hand or the other, or sometimes over his shoulder. He must have been in his early thirties, thin, not very tall, with a black mustache and a loud, slightly nasal voice when he greeted Juan.
- Rinaldi, it's been so long since we've seen you around here!
They didn't usually address each other informally in the neighborhood, it seemed, even though they'd known each other since they were kids. They hugged for a while like people who hadn't seen each other in years.
- Juana, come here ! Look who's here.
A red-haired woman appeared from among the tables and chairs and came out onto the sidewalk. She hugged Juan, but couldn't fully embrace him because her belly, eight or nine months pregnant, prevented her.
- What a surprise!
"See?" said the man, anxiously wringing out the dry dish towel. "You do what you can."

- Have you decided on a name yet?
-Juana.
- What if it's a boy?
"He's not going to do it, we were already told," the woman replied.
- Who?
- And who's going to do it? I'm surprised, Juan!
We went inside and sat down at a table by the window. The sun was warm and shone directly on the table, which had a flowered oilcloth. There were people looking at us and greeting Juan.
"I hope I'm not putting him in a difficult position," I said.
"Don't worry, we've all been categorized here for a long time; each of us goes into a box we can't get out of. I, for example, am Lidia's eternal boyfriend, no matter what happens to us. Look at that guy over there, do you see him?"
I tried to look into the back corner, next to the bathroom door. He was young, his head resting on one fist, leaning on the table. With his other elbow, he was pushing an empty glass and making it clink against another one that Santos was bringing him, full of it.
"What's he doing?" I asked. "Is he toasting to himself?"
On the contrary, what he's doing is trying to explain the laws of mechanics, which failed him some time ago. He killed his little boy. It was an accident, of course. But do you think he's forgiven? Like him, this place is a zoo.
- And what are you?
- Is that what you wanted to ask me?
-Actually, I wanted to ask you if you really believe that Maria has any supernatural abilities.
- And what does it matter what I believe? Don't you see that everyone believes it? If Santos, a former soldier, went to ask him about his wife's pregnancy, there's not a dog that wouldn't believe it.
"Speaking of dogs..." I said, and suddenly Santos's hairy hands were setting down the cups of coffee with milk and the plate of croissants. He must have heard me, because he said: "Dogs sometimes have to be killed; they reproduce like rabbits and take over the streets."
When he left, Juan laughed.
-An obsessive...

I stirred my coffee with milk and allowed myself a croissant. I looked at the street, the traffic that had increased and then suddenly slowed down and became increasingly sporadic. The hands of the wall clock with the Cinzano advertisement showed almost seven in the evening.
"I need to know something, Juan. Please don't take it the wrong way, or take it that way if you want, I can't help it. I came here as a journalist, after all."
-Just ask. I know you didn't come here to do a story about the witch on 47th Street in the city of diagonals.
-Exactly, but I can't take anything for granted based on Maria's story. It all fits together too well, almost like it's been made up. Can you confirm anything about your father's involvement in the robbery?
"How cold-blooded you are! You're asking me to betray my father because you know I hate him. You must have realized that just by looking at us that day in the car when we brought her home."
-Okay, I'm not apologizing. Things happen to me too, and all this has helped me forget a little about the miseries that plague me.
She looked at me, frowning, searching my face for sincerity, since my words sounded rehearsed. Was that so?
"Women," he said, sighing heavily. He slammed his fists on the table; the tablecloth didn't even wrinkle, it was old and stiff. "A whiskey , boss!" he shouted toward the counter.
I waited for them to bring it to him. He took two quick sips, set the glass down, and fixed his gaze on mine. He loathed me. It wasn't contempt, but the most absolute hatred I'd ever seen. I was nothing more than a target for him, but his hatred was already formed, already conceived within him like the creature growing in Santos's wife's womb. But Juan Rinaldi's hatred wasn't a creature, but a mature, potent, and calculating being, because it hadn't yet been unleashed.
"Women, what about them?" I asked, challenging him. At the risk of palpable violence, I felt more alive than I had in a long time.
-They hurt, like my old lady. Or they lie, like Lidia. My father is a rabid dog, but he doesn't hide his teeth.
- And what is Lidia lying about, if I may ask?

"His love lies behind a tombstone, and every time I come, I visit it. That house is a cemetery, haven't you realized that yet, Cecilia? What do you think those noises are? Mice? That house knows everything; it's like a closed universe, as if God chose it to lay his remains to rest."
He finished his drink and ordered another. The light was fading, and the lights on the corner and in some of the shops came on. A barbershop, half a block away, was letting in men and boys who were shouting for a football club. A gust of cool wind came in through the door.
"Shall we go back?" I said.
- What? Are you scared now? Are you afraid of me? Don't worry, I'm just a harmless fellow, I bark but I don't bite, I don't have enough fangs, I leave that to my old man.
He had finally answered my question.
I didn't wait for him. I went for a walk alone, the few blocks, followed by a couple of dogs who soon abandoned me when the noises from the house got louder.

4

The following days yielded no new information. María Cortéz would greet me in the mornings and then go shopping or retreat to her consulting room. Of the story's protagonists, only Rinaldi and Benítez's sons remained. I couldn't expect anything from the former, of course, and I didn't know the latter. Lidia told me they were twins; one had a very young child and lived in his parents' old house on a street far from the center. The other was single, a womanizer, and bad-tempered, and drove a Torino. But neither of them would speak to me about their father, who had died a few years earlier after a stroke had left him bedridden for a long time.
I set about organizing my notes and drafting the article. I imagined writing something interesting, well-written, and that wouldn't offend anyone. But all that came out was a sociopolitical pamphlet about the corruption of public

officials within a police and psychological framework that wouldn't worry any of those involved, but that would offend the newspaper and the good sensibilities of its readers. Nevertheless, I wrote it, and it was very similar to an Arltian chronicle or etching . I typed it out neatly. At three in the morning, I finished the five pages and put them all in an envelope that I would take to Buenos Aires the next day. Leandro might consider publishing it in "El Conciliábulo," a kind of independent cultural magazine that didn't exclude essays on politics, economics, and society from purely literary texts. It was too ambitious, and although I didn't tell him so on the phone, he knew that the project had been born for an intense but probably very short life.
It was time to leave, I told myself on Saturday at noon. I asked Lida for the terminal's phone number to find out the train schedule. When I hung up the phone on the small table by the stairs, María Cortéz appeared beside me without me having heard her approach.
- Any news?
He was referring to the check, of course. Leandro had promised him the newspaper would pay well, but now that the article's destination had changed, he didn't know how he would sort out this mess.
-You need to talk to Mr. Mallea, I'm not in charge of the financial matter.
Mr. Mallea manipulates events to suit his own purposes. He makes promises, fails to keep them, and we are the ones who suffer the consequences of his fickle ambitions as a frustrated intellectual.
She stood there, looking as she did in the mornings, mature yet attractive, wearing a white dress and her hair pulled back in a bun. Her sallow skin seemed tanned by the sun, even though I had rarely seen her go out, only a block away at most, or to the dog yard.
-Sometimes I prefer the boasting of the Benítez family, who, believing themselves to be superior, are just like us.
-I'm truly sorry, Maria, I know I was counting on that money to save the house.
Then she went upstairs, and I heard her pace the hall two or three times, and I found that hesitation odd. I went to the kitchen and told Lida I was leaving that afternoon, and asked if Juan would come to take me to the station. She put the pot on the stove, wiped her hands with the dish towel, and said to me:

"I don't know, miss. She had a fight with her father last night..."
Suddenly, she turned her head toward the street. She must have heard something unexpected, but I could only make out the usual midday sounds. Just as she was about to say something else, she stopped again and practically ran out of the kitchen, across the hall into the living room, and peered out the open window. I followed her, slowly.
- What's wrong, Lidia?
Didn't you hear the car?
- Which one? Many pass by…
-The engine of Benítez's Torino, the braking and the turns when turning corners. He always does it on Saturday nights, when he goes out partying, and on Sundays when he goes to the stadium with his brother.
-But it's early…
That's why it seemed strange to me...unless...
I saw that charade coming.
-So you heard it, what does that mean?
-Maybe nothing, but Jorge Benítez doesn't usually come through this neighborhood, especially not at this time of day.
-So it didn't happen…
"No, miss, it's sure not to happen until very late at night, probably," he said, condescendingly as if talking to an idiot.
I went up to my room to finish packing my bag. I would call a taxi to the station. My head was aching, and I rummaged through everything looking for my medicine box. It wasn't there, nor was the box of insulin vials. I searched again and again; I was sure I had never taken it out of the left pocket of my bag. I checked the closet and the nightstand drawer, then the floor under the bed and in the corners. It wasn't in the bathroom either. I thought about María Cortéz's uncertain footsteps in the hallway half an hour earlier. What I was thinking couldn't be true. And if it were, what was the reason? What an absurd and childish idea she must have come up with if it were true. I was so furious that I went out into the hallway and banged on his bedroom door, but then I heard a car engine speeding back and forth on the street right in front of the house, the screech of brakes on the cobblestones, and the abrupt acceleration and deceleration of a high-powered engine. It was broad

daylight, with a splendid sun streaming in through the open windows because it was cleaning day.
I went to the hallway window that faced the side of the house. There were no cars, and only a bus passed by. But I could hear the roar of the engine, as if it were raging. I went downstairs to the kitchen.
- Where is your mom?
-In his consultation room.
-I already went by and it's not there.
-Then at the door, look…
María Cortéz stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, arms crossed, her head swaying from side to side, as if watching a tennis match. I know what she saw, just as I heard. A car driving along the street, as if keeping watch. But it wasn't; it was stalking, not hiding. Where was the car in the afternoon sun, which was beginning its languid, provincial siesta?
"They're watching us, Cecilia. You'll have to stay," he told me as he turned and closed the door. The light escaped from the house, and I knew then that the time for negotiation had ended and the time for backroom deals had begun.

A storm arose, but it was only a wind that formed with intense, brief gusts at first, rattling shutters and banging doors as it swept through the hallways because the windows hadn't yet been closed. Lidia went through each room and closed them, and as the wind was pushed back, the house trembled with cries of anguish. That's what I heard: shouts and the flapping of wings. Something had happened long before, when the house was being built, and the winds had played a part in it all. Wings and winds were linked by an intimate necessity, but above all else, a symbolism survived that compelled them to persist in the form of a tragedy. A boy, I'd been told in the neighborhood one of those afternoons, had been crushed by a collapsing wall, the son of the owner of the corner store, which has been walled up ever since, like a tomb.
I felt like I was in an Aeschylus tragedy, exposed to a furious Cassandra. When María Cortéz closed the front door to the sound of the Torino's engine, I was still by the telephone table. I was trapped, I knew it very well,

intimidated by the senselessness and whim of that witch who was revealing her true face as night approached. The light outside succumbed to the clouds the winds had brought, creating a sky befitting the scene of gloom and ill omens. The house grew dark; no one turned on the lights. Lidia had finished closing all the windows, and when the house could finally make its characteristic noises, María Cortéz approached me, smiling cynically in a grimace so strange I never thought anyone could form with their facial muscles. As if those muscles were formed on a different structure than the skull. I fleetingly recalled something I once read: the fissures of the skull close in childhood, but some adults have the ability to expand, or perhaps open, it, as if they needed to expel or receive the elements of the sky, the mists of the clouds, and the cries of the earth.

I picked up the phone receiver.

"Who are you going to call, Cecilia?" she asked me. "The police? You should have learned your lesson by now. But you go out of your way to suppress anything that makes you like us, and that's not good."

He was right, he would never acknowledge what had festered to remain like a cancer, and then explode in the rooms where suicide lives embedded.

She took hold of my arm, firmly but gently. Her hand was almost a crutch for my body, so we stayed on the floor. She led me to the kitchen, darkened by the restless shadows of the trees in the yard. She didn't turn on the lights. Then Lidia came in; she'd gone out to feed the dogs, but she was back sooner than usual. The animals started barking again when she came in. She wiped her hands with the dish towel, looked around, perhaps wondering if there was anything left to do, and then sat down at the table with us. The three of us stayed there, waiting, because that was all I knew. The lives of those women were a constant waiting for the events they knew were coming. When we don't know what will become of our lives, when the future is as certain as an enigma, the present is all we have left, and the past a nightmare that, fulfilling the role of the esoteric, consoles us from mediocrity, the only name we can give to the present: that thing that does not exist, that deception of the mind, a dirty oasis in which we swim towards shores that are moving away.

I was crying, but even though I tried to hide my silly sobs, my face became a rag, the hair that had fallen across it smeared with tears. They stared at me without saying a word. Hours passed, maybe two, and time and silence resigned me to it. Only the dogs truly kept me company, and for a few moments I thought I understood words in their varying forms of anguish, because that's what their barks and howls were on that windy, rainless night, a strange night on the Buenos Aires pampas that seemed to be reborn from time to time to reclaim the ground lost to the city's growth.

I glanced at the wall clock above the kitchen sink. It was ten o'clock at night. The roar of the car continued outside, mixed with many other sounds, which was to be expected on a Saturday night, so I tried to rationalize all these signs that were driving me crazy. I couldn't run away, and there was no point in speaking or asking for anything; I could only wait for María Cortéz's plans to unfold.

The doorbell rang. All three faces turned toward the door. Lidia got up. I heard her open the door, close it, and then the soft click of her heels followed by heavy footsteps. In the kitchen doorway, she was holding Juan's arm. He smelled of cheap cologne and his hair was slicked back in a side part. Suddenly, I noticed he looked old and worn out, dressed, unusually, in the suit of a lonely office worker who goes out on a Saturday night to a brothel he sneaks into. Then I realized their plans for that night, and I didn't need to hear what María said afterward. They left when she made a gesture of contempt and resignation, raising her eyebrows and twisting her lips into such a plastic expression that I wondered if her face had bones.

-We will reconcile the popular opinion of the neighborhood about us with reality. If we are prostitutes, this will be a brothel.

He got up and, rummaging in a cupboard in the dark, took out a bottle which he placed on the table. He brought two glasses and filled them halfway. The scent of the sweet alcohol wafted through the kitchen, where the wind had been captured and bound. I sympathized with the wind; my chains were disability and illness.

"Have some, Cecilia. It's a liqueur I make myself, from an old recipe of my grandmother's. She died when I was very young. My parents couldn't understand how I could remember so much about her. If I had told them

everything I knew, my grandmother's whole story, which they hadn't even heard remotely. She was my father's mother. She was Italian, from Sicily, a true southerner, stubborn and wicked. She lived in Buenos Aires for a while, and I didn't see her die; they only told me she was gone forever. The last time I saw her, she was in bed, her body thin but firm as a tree trunk, with sallow skin and chestnut-brown hair streaked with gray. Her hair fascinated me with the strange twists of gold, from dull to brilliant, and the white patches that were like luminous shadows in a painting. I don't remember the words she used to explain everything she knew, only the essence. That inheritance that destroyed the life I tried to build when I met Pablo." That heritage that I cannot deny without losing the essence of who I am.

- And what is it?

-I'm a fucking witch, if you like to call me that, because that's what you're thinking.

I drank from my glass. It was a liqueur as sweet as an elixir. A few seconds later, I felt it coursing through my body, following the pathways of my veins. Was it a sweet poison? I might have wished it were, perhaps, but that wasn't how it worked. If it was poison, it was because of the havoc it would wreak on my body without the comfort of insulin.

- She likes it, doesn't she? It's amazing what Marietta Sottocorno knew.

Was I going to talk about Grandma, about the essence of her ancestral being? There wasn't time, and there would never be a need again. The doorbell rang again, and I sensed, or rather, I knew who it might be. The car had stopped a while before, long enough for a man to walk half a block along an empty sidewalk, kick some stray dog, and stand for a few seconds in front of the house to light a cigarette. Then he rang the doorbell, which sounded like a hunting horn in the middle of a dark forest on a stormy night. The house had wooden walls, and the old trees seemed to relive their ignominy as they were felled and vanquished. Those that weren't turned into coffins were used in the house. Perhaps, the same fate.

She went to open the door. She returned with a young man, masculine in face, but with a dry expression. His face looked as if it had been cut with a dull knife: dark blond hair and a barely grown beard that still seemed rough to the eye, a straight nose, a square chin scarred, and seemingly silky

eyebrows above gray eyes. They weren't green, though they might have once been due to the light, but gray, as if filled with a taciturn melancholy and implacable disenchantment. He stood in the kitchen doorway, looking at me. The cigarette was between his lips, his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket.
"This is it," said María Cortéz, glancing at both of them. Then she sat down, placed her hands on the table, and moved them as if counting money.
The man, who was undoubtedly Jorge Benítez, took a wad of bills out of his pocket and placed it on the table.
"The rest on Monday," he said.
She looked at me.
-Go upstairs. You see, my dear. It won't be enough, but it's something.
Benítez approached me and grabbed my arm. I resisted, but I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of seeing me cry and beg. Neither my weakness nor my willpower were enough to stop him from forcing me to walk as best I could, without crutches, forcing me to lean on the same arm that hurt me. It was a pain and a punishment that nevertheless kept me standing. We climbed the stairs slowly, him pushing me if necessary, me slowing my steps to try to come up with words that would make him give up, but my mind was as barren as my body.
We arrived at the room. Who knows if he didn't already know her, if perhaps he'd been watching me from across the street. Maybe he was the anonymous man strolling by, smoking after dinner. He pushed me onto the bed, not forcefully, it was just an impulse. As he stood there by the bed, cigarette in his mouth, taking off his jacket and t-shirt, he must have been thinking about the meaning of my words, the ones I was now managing to utter in a broken voice.
-No, please.
-So you wanted to denigrate my father's name, didn't you?
He went straight to the bag on the floor. He bent down and started rummaging through it. I saw his broad back and shoulders moving as if he were digging in the dirt. He stood up with the manuscript of the article and went to the light on the bedside table. He was so close I could smell the light

hair on his chest, and the aroma of tobacco and beer on his breath when he said:

-Juan Rinaldi told me, you know ? I'm not going to let you tarnish my father's memory.

"And why is Rinaldi interested in defending his father?" I said, growing bolder, feeling that the anger was helping me to resist.

He shrugged.

-Many people love those who hurt them.

He tore the sheets in two, then in four, and then into as many pieces as he could. He threw them on the bed next to me.

"They were very well written," he said, as he sat down.

He left the cigarette on the table, without an ashtray. He took off his pants. He positioned his body next to mine and began to caress my breasts.

-I'll help you.

The voice was low and hoarse, as if he'd been shouting on the court that very afternoon. But he'd surely come on Sunday; today it was merely the sudden chill the wind had brought from death-like, frigid regions. I closed my eyes, knowing that the only thing I could do to prevent was him hurting me, or killing me. I didn't want to die like that, perhaps broken, on a blood-soaked bed.

He kissed me on the lips, but I didn't respond. I felt the nourishment of the alcohol and the cigarette. I felt something different. It wasn't Bernardo's familiar, healthy breath with which he intended to cure me.

Jorge Benítez knew that there are no cures, and that clay is molded with clay. It wasn't rape, nor was it an explicit desire. I simply felt his body on top of and inside me, I heard his calm, mature, and wise voice. He knew pain, and he shared it with me, and that's why I gave him my pain.

Unlike Bernardo, he accepted it.

When he finished, he sat down on the bed. The cigarette was gone, leaving a small trace of ash on the wood. He lit another and turned to look at me.

- Do you want it ?

Without waiting for a response, he placed the burning tip on my injured foot. The smell of burnt flesh was all I felt. There was no more pain; they could

amputate it soon, even without anesthesia, I told myself. I hid my face in my hands and burst into tears.
I heard him getting dressed, then the footsteps on the floor. The floorboards seemed to fall silent instead of creaking and groaning as they always did.
"Bye," he said.
The silence, filled with noises, deafened me. My naked body was a wreck on the bed.

I didn't sleep, of course. I lay on the mattress of wrinkled, sweaty sheets, the scraps of the article scattered like confetti from a party that was already over because dawn was breaking. It was morning, trying to enter the room through the cracks in the shutters, patiently, because the house closed its windows like a blind man closes his eyes. I went to the bathroom, got into the old, empty bathtub, and turned on the faucets, which squeaked and sprayed water like the old, broken plumbing always did. I washed, got dressed, and gathered the larger pieces of paper again to put them in my bag. I dragged it across the floor and went out into the hallway. I held onto the walls as I made my way toward the stairs and passed Lidia's door. It was ajar, and I heard voices. I peered through the crack. Lidia was on the bed, sitting against the headboard, stroking Juan's back. He was sitting on the floor, naked, his hands covering his face. The room was lit with a curious glow, a mixture of the artificial light from the bedside lamp and the sunlight that had managed to sneak in at the foot of the bed.
Juan was crying, or at least his cries were inarticulate, punctuated by meaningless monosyllables. Lidia was speaking, as if consoling him. Juan uncovered his face and placed his hands on his knees. He turned to look at her, and in the light, I saw his desperate expression.
"What am I going to do now?" he said.
The tone was one of urgent anguish, as if he had killed someone.
Lidia cupped Juan's face in her hands, and with her thumbs she dried his tears.
"You didn't kill him," he said.
-But I took him to the hospital, you know? And what's my mom going to think?
The man who hated his parents felt lost without them.

All Sunday morning I walked the sidewalks of La Plata, trying to find a taxi to take me to the station, but I couldn't go very far without crutches and my bag. Branches littered the sidewalks, the curbs were covered in leaves, and trash was scattered in the streets. The storm had wreaked havoc, and everyone seemed busy sweeping in front of their houses, while dogs scavenged through the debris. No one helped me; they just stared at me as I walked by like a homeless person, with my sickly face and my unsteady, drunken steps.
A passing car honked its horn and stopped.
-Good morning, miss. Are you feeling alright?
It was Eduardo, Juan's friend. I told him what I needed, and he offered me a ride. On the way, after a while, he said to me:
-She had a rough time, I imagine. Nobody comes out of that house unscathed.
- Do you know about Juan's father?
-Yes, this morning when she said goodbye. She won't stay for the funeral; she can't face her mother's reproach.
We arrived at the terminal, she helped me with my bag and waited with me until the train left.
There were few people on the platforms and the service was reduced. We had to wait a long time.
"Thank you very much. I'm sorry to interrupt your Sunday," I said, as we sat on one of the hard benches in the waiting room.
-It's nothing. I have all day to go...
"Where to?" I asked.
He looked at me and smiled as if embarrassed.
"A girlfriend, don't tell me..." I said, avoiding any confidences.
He shrugged, resigned, and in him resignation was a chosen act.
- What do you want me to do? I've always been in love with Lidia.
I never published the article. I rewrote it in detail, adding many reflections, turning it almost into a story. I put it in a drawer, where the dead are left.

THE DEAD OF MALDONADO

1

Soledad came, as she does every afternoon, to change my bandages. She's the only nurse Bernardo trusts to care for my wound until the day I have surgery. She chatted with me to distract me from the pain of changing the gauze on the ulcers. She talked about her life, about her relationship with Ibáñez, constant and clandestine. Even though Mateo is now a widower, his sick son condemns him to the unbearable memory of the wife who abandoned him—because when people die, don't they abandon us?—with that human wreck who comes and goes from the hospital. But, just as Mateo won't give up until the boy reaches adulthood, Bernardo takes the cross of my body upon his shoulders.

I returned from work in La Plata with my leg practically useless, on the verge of dying, threatening to drag the rest of my body down with it. Fever and chills were the symptoms, anguish the consequence. He admitted me to Rivadavia Hospital, awaiting a surgery date. My remaining friends come to visit, some from the newspaper, others barely known, at Bernardo's urging. "I mustn't be alone at any time," he advised everyone behind my back. I know why he says that. I talk in my sleep, perhaps, or maybe he read the messy handwritten notes on my desk. It doesn't matter; they're his now, my payment for his care, because I've already repaid his love many times over, if such a

thing is even necessary. The law of retribution doesn't exempt feelings, it seems to me; my mother instilled in me that idea of duty and justice. Bernardo did nothing more than tighten the screws that hold that structure together in my mind. He, poor and dear guilty child, with the carpenter's hammer that his father put in his hand, destroys what he tries to repair. Soledad always smiles at me when she washes my wound. I ask her about the world outside. She knows about politics as well as medicine; she knows the world is sick and beyond saving. Every now and then, entire populations are massacred, just as a limb is amputated. And the smell, my God, that comes from the infected leg, which nothing can hide. I've seen her frown over the mask that conceals her grimace of sorrow and pity. However accustomed she is to it, it's not the same when it involves a loved one. Pain is inherent in affection. It's a smell everyone pretends not to notice, but it lives in the air. And that afternoon, while she spoke, I heard nothing but the rustling of my memories. Imagination is often a savior, and memory is merely one of its many variations. That's why the bittersweet taste of gangrene brought back memories of the corpses at the Maldonado Hospital, when I was twelve, I think.

Mom had recently married Dad Taboada, and now that she was more relieved about our financial future, which had so embittered her during my father's long and painful illness, she had resumed her meetings with fellow activists and comrades. I first heard her talking at length on the phone in the evenings, when she returned from school. At the night school where she taught adults, she ran into people from her socialist activism days. But times had changed; democratic socialism had taken up arms and shifted toward an intransigent left. According to them, the events in the country demanded more decisive actions. Perhaps they meant aggressive, but they didn't dare say it aloud. Their shouts in the plazas demanded freedom and social justice, and they hid the hands that grasped for weapons.
That's how she met the men and their wives who came to school to learn what they hadn't been able to as children, due to poverty or parental neglect. They came from poor neighborhoods in the greater Buenos Aires area and worked in factories or construction. The women had tried to entice her to join the

rallies, but Mama didn't need those formalities, which she dismissively called "womanly." There, at the front of a classroom, she had seen that her class was full of men, some strong, some weak, who crossed the Riachuelo River to sit on uncomfortable, cramped benches, with spiral notebooks and pencils that broke every other minute. All of them, however, with attentive and somewhat dreamy eyes, because they saw in the words she taught them and wrote on the blackboard new reasons for living. Words that added to the gears with which, each morning when they got up early, they set in motion the engines that moved the legs that took them to the bus stops and the arms that lifted the bags of cement. She wasn't interested in women who worked as maids and complained that when they got home they had to do the same work and, on top of that, endure their husbands' violent tempers. My mother was a feminist, of course, but she didn't condone the strategies women had always used to survive. Being a victim wasn't the solution, she said.

And that's how she was never a victim of anyone but herself. That's why, when Onganía's coup came, she didn't return home until two in the morning, hiding nothing from Renato. She told him about the clandestine committee meetings in the students' houses, all led by other militants she had met and some new ones. I listened from my room, and sometimes I would get up and hide in the hallway by the door, listening to her tell Renato what she thought of each of them, trying to calm her husband's worry, which manifested itself in brief outbursts after many reasonable objections.

"Don't worry, " she told him, probably stroking him, though I couldn't see them. "I've always known how to take care of myself."

And so it was, until that rally in Plaza de Mayo the day after the coup. The coup had been known for several months; Illia's government was on its last legs. That's why the left-wing activists were already organized when it was formalized. Everyone took to the streets and, resisting the gunfire and bombs of the armed forces, reached the Plaza mainly via Rivadavia and Juan B. Justo, joined by columns arriving from the Costanera, Avenida Centenera, Díaz Vélez, and Álvarez Jonte. Caballito was a chaotic scene near Primera Junta, and Avenida General Paz was blocked. News and television vans looked like getaway cars, fleeing the hostilities while filming. I wonder how many of those

hours of footage survived not only censorship but also the destruction that came in the following decade.

Mom was in one of the main columns, and they had made her their leader because she was fierce and a fighter. Her body was slender, but she possessed an energy that many women and men envied; her voice never tired of shouting, her arms raised, unarmed, but shaking in gestures of perpetual struggle. That day, two men who had attended her school lifted her up and placed her on the makeshift platform in a corner. It was made of vegetable crates and planks looted from the construction sites where they worked. She only had a megaphone to make herself heard loud and clear from a distance, if the roar of the crowd and the sirens of the police or ambulances allowed, even the bombs that echoed from several streets to the south. From Balcarce Street and from the Government House, it was said that several platoons were arriving at the head of three tanks.

None of that mattered at the moment. The afternoon wore on, rainy and steeped in despair, but not the kind that paralyzes, rather the kind that stings and cannot be withdrawn, sometimes followed by lamentation, but not usually found in certain temperaments. My mother was one of them. She spoke and shouted against the dictatorship, almost weeping, but she didn't cry because the tears were in her voice and in the construction of the phrases she chose. It was her swan song, I imagine, because after the time she had dedicated to caring for us, sowing in her mind the seeds that would sprout that day, the dictatorship ruthlessly cut down the crops grown that long afternoon in the Plaza. There was no harvest, only a great bonfire in the silos of the country. Sometimes I could see in Renato's eyes a succession of contradictory emotions struggling to hide behind his glasses and beard, but Mom chose to ignore the implicit reproach as she continued packing her bag and putting the finishing touches on the banners that the party members would come to pick up in their truck. Then Renato and I, sitting at the kitchen table, he grading his students' exams and I doing my homework, watched her leave that last afternoon and get into the truck like any other man. She was no longer a teacher, a mother, or a wife, but a worker committed to the future of her country, or at least that's what they all said. They left the door open, so we could watch the rickety truck drive away, packed with men waving their

arms, flags, and banners, shouting and singing a mix of patriotic songs and party anthems full of obscenities. When they turned the corner and the truck disappeared from sight, I got up and closed the door. Renato went back to his papers and I heard him humming some kind of march through his closed lips.
"What time does Mom come back?" I asked her.
"Who knows?" he told me.
He didn't come back all night. I heard him pacing around the house, moving the kitchen chairs, opening and closing the refrigerator, talking on the phone with several people. In the morning I woke up, but when I left my bedroom in my school uniform so he could take me to school, I saw him with his fists on the telephone table, and I thought he was crying. He looked at me, rubbed his eyes, and hid behind his tortoiseshell glasses.
"There's no school today," she said. "There was a commotion in the plaza, Ceci. Your mom was arrested."
Of course I understood what that meant, but since it was so new to me, my feelings were different from his. I was excited by the thrill of the unknown, by what broke the routine and brought new colors to the day. He, however, held back his anger and anguish only for my sake. He took my hand firmly, but I felt the trembling beneath my skin. We got in the car and drove through the streets and avenues teeming with soldiers. There were abandoned cars with their doors open and the cobblestones littered with trash. Few civilians dared to venture out, only a few old women who didn't care what was happening and hit the soldiers with their shopping bags when they mocked them and tried to stop them. I heard gunshots now and then, but when I turned around there was nothing but scattered groups of kids running to hide in the vacant lots.
"Where are we going?" I asked Renato.
-To the police station, it seems they took her to the precinct. Are you scared?
The apparent incongruity in their characters, which I thought I had discovered during those early years of my adolescence, was beginning to dissolve. My mother's life was a rollercoaster of elation and reserve, and now Renato was showing me a side of his character that had been hidden behind the facade of the professor. He was cynical out of disillusionment, but above all, I discovered he possessed a strength that wasn't characterized by

aggression, but rather by an immense tolerance that absorbed everything that hurt him and digested it until it became part of himself. Knowing what Mom was going through, all he could do was go and help her, however he could, and if he couldn't do anything, at least he would wait at the police station door, perhaps enduring the shoves and blows with which they would try to drag him out.

"Don't be afraid," he told me, without taking his eyes off the windshield. "I brought you here because it's the only way they'll let us see her. I need to know she's okay, you understand ? That they didn't do anything to her, and if the soldiers see you, and if the journalists take pictures, we at least have the minimum guarantee that they won't touch her."

It was that midday when I began to understand the usefulness of the facades we journalists construct, facades that everyone believes are so unnecessary, or even harmful. Politicians have always known this, but military strategists have been slow to learn the lesson, though they finally did, applying it better than many of those who have boasted of being masters. Latin American dictatorships are precisely that: tortuous sheds built behind the scenes of theater or big-budget films. They also say that football will be the dictatorship's next master hand, and it doesn't surprise me seeing men with empty skulls running after the round chimera with which they try to fill the void in their brains, brains that some never had, and others lost to a wound in a poorly lit factory.

It happened just as Renato had expected. The pushing and shoving, the crushing of bodies, left me feeling suffocated and crushed as he yanked my arm like a sack he wouldn't let go of for anything in the world. And suddenly we were at the Monserrat police station, in an old building in the historic center of Buenos Aires, where the entrances to the tunnels he'd told me about —the ones that connected to the church, the convent, the leper colony, and the port's banks—were visible. I didn't understand any of the voices and demands, only the gunshots in the street and the megaphones blaring cries like those of dying dinosaurs. Renato held my hand so tightly it almost hurt, but my arm was nearly numb after so much shoving and squeezing. I thought I walked down a long corridor, but it was just a few meters to a tall counter

full of stationery on metal pegs and typewriters stubbornly trying to make themselves heard with the unbribable insistence of the desk cops' fingers. Renato gave names, document numbers, and affiliations. Finally, they let us into the long corridor that led to the cells. They tried to stop me from going in, but he insisted on taking me. The soldiers blinked at the flash of a camera that no one knew how it had been smuggled in, or where it was even located. Were the narrow vents high in the thick walls traitors that no one had considered? There were orders that would surely arrive late, but the damage was done, or perhaps the good had been done, for us. They took us to the cell where Mom was. We saw her clinging to the bars, anxious. I saw them look into each other's eyes: she reproaching him for bringing me, he enduring her gaze and swallowing his reproach.
And I, the uncertain safe passage between them both, saw love born amidst resentment and bitterness. A fragile, frail love, like a premature baby, but one that would still outlast the flesh-and-blood daughter.

A few days later, most of them had been released, but Mom and many others, especially left-wing activists and radicals, remained imprisoned. Dad went back and forth to the police station, but he no longer took me. He kept me locked inside because school had been closed since bombs had been planted in schools in Mataderos and Barracas. I prepared the food the way I had seen Mom do it when I waited for him to come home from his afternoon classes. When I heard the car back onto the sidewalk and saw the lights turn off, and then the key in the lock, my heart would flutter with joy and happiness. Renato was only mine, I would tell myself then. I became aware for the first time of the jealousy I felt toward my mother. She, so intelligent, so self-assured, so unattainable, was now beyond my reach. But when he came in and I saw him looking overwhelmed, throwing himself down on the old sofa, abandoning his keys on the coffee table, loosening his tie and kicking off his shoes, which lay like dead dogs on the carpet, I told myself that he didn't love me, that I wasn't his real daughter, that the other woman, my mother, was still competing and winning from prison. And it was because she was in prison that she was gaining ground in Renato's heart.

I didn't have my mother's wisdom, of course. I was a capricious teenager interested only in my own interests. I served her food on the makeshift table, brought her cigarettes, turned on the television so she could watch the western series she liked—I think it was *Gunsmoke* , too intellectual for the average taste of the time. She finished her steak with salad without ever taking her eyes off Matt Dillon, or maybe the girls at the local bar. Without his glasses, with his unkempt beard and the smell of tobacco and sweat, the smell of the street muffled by the car's confinement on the way home, those were the only real glimpses of masculinity I discovered during that time.

"Did they tell you anything?" I asked as the end credits music played on the television, which illuminated us as the only real thing in that world that was falling down on us. And I was only just now realizing it.

"Nothing, Ceci. They've labeled her an old-school Peronist because of what happened that day, you know . No matter how much I explain, they don't want to hear anything."

- Did you see her? Is she okay? Did you bring her any clothes?

-Yes, what do you want me to say? I don't know if they're giving it to her. She's thin, and it worries me.

He was trying not to cry, poor thing, watching the question and answer program that had just started.

- And the lawyer, Dad?

He looked at me the way he looked at my mother, with admiration. I was twelve years old, not a stupid girl, but maybe he still saw me as a little girl.

"Just as smart as your mother," he said, affectionately tugging at my hair. "But reality isn't like on TV, Ceci. This country doesn't have lawyers, it has snipers and executioners. There are tons of them out there." He pointed behind him with his thumb, toward the front door. " You stay here and don't go out."

That night, sitting on the sofa in front of the television, minutes before the broadcast ended, the doorbell rang. Renato put his finger to his lips, ordering me to be quiet. It was almost midnight. He got up silently and looked through the peephole. He opened the door, and Dr. Sebastiano Farías entered, another member of the well-known family of lawyers and doctors who were always on the radio and in the newspapers, who held official positions or seats

in Congress. But Sebastiano was a strange soul, according to what Mama had said, because he was the only friend Renato trusted. He entered like a messenger of the night, his black suit clinging to his slender frame, where only the pocket watch on his vest gleamed. He placed his black hat on the table with the plates.
-Ceci, please…
" Leave it alone , my dear..." she said, scolding Renato.
-It's just that I don't want to...
“What I came to tell you is something that concerns her,” he said, taking a sheet of newspaper folded in quarters from his suit pocket. He unfolded it on the table. The fat from the meat had hardened on the plate, and two or three flies hovered like guards. I saw the photograph on the far right of the second page of that evening’s edition of La Prensa, in which my father and I appeared, caught in the middle of our movements in the police station corridors. It was a dark photograph, but our faces were perfectly clear, and especially my mother’s expression behind the bars.
Then Papa Renato started to cry, and Dr. Sebastiano hugged him. Looking at me, he winked.
The balm of the night had entered.
I got up to take the dirty dishes to the kitchen.

2

Fifteen days had passed, more or less, it didn't matter, because the fact was that Mom was still detained. The photo in the newspaper had served to spread a trivial case throughout the political sphere, a case in which we, unknown individuals, suddenly acquired a bad reputation as fleeting as the newspaper's print run. However, the very thing that Renato and Dr. Farías had relied on to ensure Mom's safety and ultimately her release was precisely what had generated lingering political resentment within the military, or rather, it was the pretext for something else that we would likely never know.

My mother's militant background, the confusing and absurd episode of Perón's visit, my father Tejada's working-class background—whose submissiveness and disinterest, over time and through various interpretations, transformed into a school of resistance that the group that succeeded my mother used as a weapon against the new forces of rebellion that Onganía had only fueled with his coup. He had opened the doors to them, whether he wanted to or not, or perhaps precisely because of it, like someone using bait to lure a beast from its den and kill it.

But my parents were a school teacher who used her last resources and tricks as an old and entrenched left-wing unionist, according to what the official media sang every day through the rhetorical verbosity of the journalists on duty, and the other a slaughterhouse worker who had lost his hand and then his life because of political corruption, already called a union leader in permanent and deadly struggle for the rights of the exploited.

Thus, my parents were turned into martyrs, lacking only the iconic holy cards that every housewife from the poor neighborhood wore in her bodice when shopping at the corner store, and that every man with a hairy chest kept in his overalls pocket while working at the factory. Dirty, worn images, touched and carried around the neighborhood, consumed by the grime on trousers and the dampness of the perspiration of those who work under the sun in the streets or locked in warehouses where the dust holds the invisible elements of death.

Renato pleaded in the courts, but in the anteroom of the Government House, where they made him wait for hours only to shov him out in the middle of the afternoon, he retained his pride. Shouldn't he have done the opposite? Justice isn't begged for, and one appeals to "the king" for absolution. But he, a keen observer of contradictory truths and legalized lies, knew that whatever he did, he would always go astray. To succeed, his mind had to be structured like that of someone who kept his wife in a cell, and that was something he couldn't change. The way he saw things was closer than others could understand, and those others lived on the horizon of an oasis, always distant and unattainable, incongruous with reason, made of fantasies imagined with a rifle slung over his shoulder like a slender, firm lily. In that oasis there was no water, only sand strewn with large pebbles, and the palm trees were walls of

steel formed by cannons, threatening the sky. And as everything that goes up must come down, death doesn't explode in the sky, but on the earth that feeds it.

All this Renato imagined during his sleepless nights, lying on the sofa in front of the television, which was on and whose screen flickered with a dead, asleep, or perhaps interrupted transmission due to the whims of the jesters: those who type on typewriters or those who turn on the machines that send the television or radio waves, where the voices of Yorick, Falstaff, and Shylock finally agree to kill Hamlet, and then divide the profits from the slices of his flesh.

It was January, and it was hot, too hot.

Mom had been transferred to the El Palomar barracks, so Renato spent his days in the west. He took the train, two buses, waited with other relatives of detainees circling the station, and returned home around midnight. The numerous appeals Sebastiano Farías had filed remained stalled; no one knew exactly where. Meanwhile, I accompanied Dad so that at least one of them could speak with her, since they wouldn't let him in. The soldiers had it in for him, so as soon as the guards saw him coming, they could do nothing but cross-draw their rifles and block his path.

"Another day then, old man..." one of them said.

" Stop bothering your wife, she deserves it..." another one told him.

" Go find yourself another one, buddy..." another guy from further down the line called out. "Can't you see she doesn't want anything to do with you? She's got enough on her plate with us already..."

He didn't tell me this; I heard it myself on the last day of January when I went with him. When I was with him, they kept quiet and let me pass, but that time I'd lagged behind, picking up the bag of cookies I'd dropped. I heard their laughter, and then they immediately stopped when they saw me. They made way for me, this scrawny, plain-looking teenager, walking through the corridor of gendarmes with the bag of clean clothes and the remains of broken cookies—the kind my mother liked.

When the barracks door closed, I heard the commotion outside. I was afraid for Renato, for his tortoiseshell glasses that might break if he fought with the guards, but above all, for his pride, the only thing that remained intact in his

fragmented soul since his wife left. But I couldn't waste any time; there were few opportunities to see Mom, to know how she was. We spoke through the bars, with a policewoman spying and listening, standing there beside us like an owl, and just as ugly.

On those occasions, we would hold hands, tightly, since kisses weren't allowed. I wondered why the other inmates could receive visits from any family member in their cells, and hug and kiss each other. My mother, on the other hand, was special. They treated her well, but let her grow thin, kept her cell clean, but forced her into silence, allowed her to see her daughter from time to time, but without letting her smell the scent of little Cecilia's hair, little Cecilia who was growing up to be a woman who would one day have all of that on her mind: prison, anger, and shame. Three witches who never got along and who constantly fought, from shouts to silence, in a seesaw that wore the heart down to its breaking point.

- How are you? - she asked me, sitting on the little bench in the cell, elbows on her knees and rubbing her hands together.

I shrugged. She already knew because she suspected as much.

" Do what you can," he told me.

I left my things on the floor.

"I'm leaving now," I said, each time more hurriedly, more aware of the pointlessness of these visits. As I was leaving, I remembered what was most important. She had this effect on me: when feelings were tamed, the social, or what she called the society of man, emerged as essential.

-There's something I have to tell you, Dad doesn't want to let you go, but I want to go.

- Where to?

-Aunt Martins called last night . Leti's parents died yesterday afternoon.

I told Renato what they had told us on the phone, of course. He told me later, saying that even though he didn't know my mother's family, my cousin Leticia needed me.

They say wasps attacked them on the beach. Leti survived. The wake is tomorrow, but Dad doesn't want to leave you…

Tell him to take you; I'm here for a while. Leticia needs you, dear. You're her only cousin.

When I came out, Renato grabbed my hand. We walked toward the exit gate. I noticed his fingers were bruised and cut, and one of his glasses lenses was broken. I felt like this time it was me holding his hand and pulling him away, at least for a while, from those who had beaten him.

Leticia's mother was Manuela Tejada, my father's only sister. In recent years I saw her very little, as well as my uncle Eber, her husband. But when my father was still alive, we would go to his country house in Haedo once a month, and we would spend the holidays at their large, tree-filled mansion. She was very beautiful, with olive skin and almond-shaped eyes, almost a homegrown Sophia Loren, and that's partly why my uncle, a blond, plump man, had fallen in love with her almost without any hope of being reciprocated. But to his surprise, she loved him. Eber Martins came from a wealthy family, and he himself worked very hard at the company, whose business I never really understood . "A service company," he would reply when asked, and since everything was whispered about and shrouded in mystery during that time of social persecution, everyone thought he was involved in shady, clandestine businesses with the protection of the military. From that emerged a certain truth that is not relevant to recount at this moment, perhaps later.
The thing is, my aunt and uncle died a horrible death. They were at the coast, just an ordinary midday on the beach. It seems a swarm of wasps arrived, and they couldn't protect themselves, even though they got into the car, and inside they were trapped, unable to escape. My cousin Leticia was their only daughter, and she was just a year older than me. She was with them, but the wasps didn't attack her. The question hung in the air, but no one said it aloud. It lingered in the glances of the people who surrounded her and tried to comfort her, Aunt Eriberta. Martins , the police officers, the nurses, the same forensic experts who performed the autopsies on the bodies they took out of the car, swollen and oozing poison from the punctures that were like small craters dilated by the heat of that summer.
The afternoon we returned to Barracas after visiting Mom, Renato asked me, once again, if I really wanted to go.

"You barely knew them," he told me, looking for excuses to avoid the guilt of leaving his wife without a visit for the next few days.
"I know Leti," I replied.
She must have imagined that little girl my age, with dark hair and green eyes like her mother's, standing on the beach, surrounded by wasps that avoided her, watching her parents dying in gestures of terror behind the car windows.
The next day we got up around seven in the morning. We ate breakfast in a hurry because Dr. Farías's car was already honking its horn. It wasn't the first time I'd been in the Fairlane , but this time I felt like I was being transported in a hearse, even though it wasn't black but dark green, with multicolored bumpers and rearview mirrors. It was the usual hearse for the dead; we were headed in a similar situation. Renato probably thought the same thing.
- Couldn't you think of anything better to use than this one today? Don't you have a Fiat, dear?
Sebastiano, in a gray suit with small checks in the fabric that was perhaps made of linen because it seemed fresh in accordance with the season, gave a start that was an insult to which Renato was used, the same one he gave in the chamber when he spoke against some law that he did not want to vote for or veto.
General Paz was then a narrow, two-lane road that circled the city. We reached Rivadavia and took the avenue west. Liniers station was packed with people queuing for the train and waiting for buses on the sidewalks. Entering the province was a risky undertaking back then. Police checkpoints were everywhere, demanding papers and eyeing the back seat suspiciously. Two men and a little girl in a high-end car seemed morally suspicious, but morality changes depending on your perspective. A polished appearance is sometimes enough to quell misgivings and allow the potential flaws that lead to the dark corners of the soul to go unnoticed.
We arrived in Haedo and I began to recognize places I hadn't visited in a long time: the curve where two branches of the Sarmiento line converge, the old printing press on the corner where the railway workshops begin, and then the long blocks of sheds where old, disused train cars peeked out, some wrecked in crashes, others burned during recent demonstrations and strikes. From all

of that area came the smell of rust and burnt metal, mingling with the overgrown grass that reached the fences onto the sidewalks.
We turned onto Rawson and crossed the level crossing, as wide as a river, crisscrossed by countless parallel or intersecting tracks in a labyrinth that both amazed and confused me at the time. We were already close to Leticia's country house. La Cantábrica was right there, which to me was nothing more than a huge property with a few low buildings that resembled sections of a factory, surrounded by enormous tiled courtyards, tall grass, iron gates and wire fences, and a couple of tall, barren chimneys. It was, in fact, the border between Haedo and Morón, and the country house was on Lamadrid Street.
Renato rolled down the window and looked out towards the factory we were passing.
Are they on strike?
"For six months now," Farías replied. "It all started with the layoffs, then the union members got mixed up and messed things up because they fought amongst themselves. There were the moderates, who, as always, wait and wait until they die or go back to work for the same miserable wages. The leftists got involved and started shooting at the soldiers on guard duty."
-I already know about that, but where are they now?
Sebastiano stopped the car and pointed towards one of the gates that led to a corner.
- Do you see that guard post? The soldiers built it and they're watching those inside from there.
Are they under siege?
"Something like that, fifty people, they say, others say a hundred, guys with their families. The women joined in one day, even with children. The factory owners washed their hands of it and made a deal with the military."
There were several men in civilian clothes and work clothes walking around the sidewalk.
-Those must be unemployed…
-Yes, but only those who seek employment from others. There's no going back; they either return or they're killed.
Renato clicked his tongue, dismissing that possibility. Farías said:

-Don't let anything frighten you, my dear. Your poet's soul should already know the human heart.

They laughed. I didn't understand, thinking only of Leticia. What could she be thinking? I couldn't, however, imagine her crying.

The estate wasn't exactly that, but a large, single-story house with a gabled Spanish tile roof, a winter garden overflowing with plants, and an immense park that included shrubs, fruit trees, pines, and two solitary cypress trees, standing side by side. When we were very little, Leticia and I would play in the hammocks that hung from the branches of the ancient oak tree. The chains creaked with rust, and the plank threatened to break, but they always held, while we ate the ripe figs we picked from the fig tree before we started swinging. We loved the vertigo and then the nausea that the continuous, jerky swing brought, with the sound of broken hinges that harmonized with the chaos of our churning stomachs and intestines. And our bet was which of us could hold it the longest before vomiting. There were two girls with faces stained purple looking at the sky behind the branches of the oak tree, the sky that was coming closer or moving away, and when we were at the highest point of the swing's arch, we saw the tips of the cypress trees, like unperturbed gods, waiting for us.

In the car, I recalled the taste of fig pulp, and I saw the purple color that suddenly covered the sky as unexpected clouds filled, imprinting on the successive golden hues a light and then dark red tone over the factory grounds. The puddles in the gutters along the curbs took on a similar hue.

"Summer storm," Farías said, parking on the sidewalk next to several other cars, probably belonging to the family I didn't remember and that Renato didn't know. We were like three strangers at a funeral, which struck me as odd at the time, given what I later discovered: that apparent ambivalence of funerals, where strangers to the deceased are more common than strangers.

Aunt Eriberta greeted us . At first, I didn't recognize her; she was overweight and had lost her elegance in just a few years. Her hair was dyed jet black, her lips bright red, and she wore excessive mascara. When she hugged me, weeping, I smelled the wine on her black dress. Pressed against her arms, I saw Renato talking to Farías.

- How big and beautiful she is, Cecilia! How lucky you came, dear! Leti is inconsolable, and she's the only little girl among so many adults.
Then he greeted Renato and Sebastiano.
-Thank you for bringing her.
-It's nothing, ma'am. My wife...
"Please don't talk to me about her, because I don't want to be disrespectful right now, especially not in front of her daughter." She had lowered her voice, but shrill as it was, it did her no good. She clasped her hands together on her black skirt, nervous, unable to avoid saying what she had wanted to avoid:
"Manuela's only brother..."
-But she is...
"Do you think I didn't know? If he'd forgotten all that nonsense, he'd be where he belongs now. Anyway, let's go inside. There are a lot of family members here."
We entered the house, cool despite the summer heat. The spacious rooms were filled with antique furniture, the mosaic floors forming large patterns, and the ceilings featured wooden beams and colonial chandeliers. Many men and women approached us, and my aunt made the introductions. I was complimented on my growth; the men squeezed my cheeks, the women rubbed them to remove the lipstick they had left behind when they kissed me passionately. Renato was practically ignored, while Farías was shown respect. Sebastiano seemed to gauge the character of each person he greeted, and they noticed. He was a well-known congressman, and no one knew for sure which side he was on. Perhaps it was this balance that saved him, like almost everyone in his family. Health politics was intertwined with judicial politics; one healed the other, and the other protected it.
There were two mortuary rooms, one for each spouse, the rooms where they had slept separately, probably after Leticia's birth. A room for each family to hold their respective prayers and say goodbye almost in private to the member who had passed away. The bodies, due to their deformity, were being viewed in closed caskets. But what caught my attention was the smell of decay. I looked at the flowers and wreaths: they were new and tried unsuccessfully to mask the aroma that everyone pretended not to notice. I imagined, inside each coffin, the pus that continued to ooze from the bodies,

as if wasp larvae had developed and were waiting for someone to open the lids.

I jumped when I felt Leticia's hand in my right. We hugged, while everyone stared at us. Some with eyes of trivial sentimentality, but in others I saw a kind of recognition, or perhaps wisdom. The Tejadas had their domestic rituals: the cross and the prayers, the simple clothes of trousers and skirts of cheap cloth in whose pockets they hid the rosaries that the Martins didn't like. The Martins, in turn, had the habit of ignoring Catholic rites and applying their own customs, which were nothing more than austerity and a simulated silence meant to conceal the mysterious designs they whispered among themselves. Obscene words, probably, in Portuguese and English, a strange mixture. Eber Martins had been a not-too-bright representative of that side, and Manuela Tejada had been the heart and soul of that family. The father was the economic foundation, the land worked for that money. The factory, I learned later, was one of Martins 's main jobs . His name was hidden behind the countless documents piled up on the bureaucratic shelves of the Ministry of Economy, which was nothing more than a branch office of the multinationals that had always pulled the strings in our country. Beyond that, the names of the individuals involved could not be ascertained, a realm reserved for conjecture and conspiracy theories that invariably ended up burying the catastrophes of reality in the realm of fantasy.

When she realized we were being watched, she grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the house. We ran out into the park and continued running along the flagstone path. She was in front, running eagerly in her black dress with lace sleeves that she'd rolled up because of the heat, and I was behind, panting and asking her where we were going. She stopped at the nursery. A bearded man with a bare torso covered in dark hair stopped us in front of the gate.

- What are you doing here?

Leticia moved away from him as if frightened.

"Don't touch it!" he whispered in my ear.

The man, who must have been the gardener, said:

"Fine, do what you want." He turned around, grabbed a shirt, and left, disappearing into the trees.

We went inside and sat down on a bench next to some empty flowerpots.
"It's cooler in here," she said. "But he sleeps on a mattress way back here, and I can't always come."
I thought about the coolness inside the house, felt the sticky dampness between the plants, and I knew what she meant. She could smell the drawers more than anyone else; it had always been that way. She knew things ahead of time.
- Why did you tell me not to touch it?
-What do I know, you know me . That man is bad…
Did he do anything to you?
-Nothing. But that's why he's going to do it.
-I don't understand you.
"I don't even understand myself, Ceci. I knew what was going to happen to them."
- Your parents?
-Yeah.
- But how would you have known about the wasps? And how would you have stopped them?
I smiled at her, using the excuse of absurdity. She wasn't crying.
-I told you a long time ago, don't you remember , when your dad died?
Now I remembered, she had taken me to the shed, which must still be somewhere in the park; the nursery hadn't been built yet. We went inside among the tools, and she showed me the axes. She had asked me if that was what Dad used to butcher the cows. Then she asked me to tell him to be careful. I didn't listen to her that time. How can you warn a man who's worked with those tools almost his whole life about the danger?
- Were you able to prevent her from cutting her hand? We know, Ceci, but things don't always happen.
That's why she doesn't cry, I told myself. She had already cried before they happened, and then not even that, because experience had taught her that tears are useless because of the inevitable. Later, much later, meditating on all this, philosophizing in a way Leticia didn't because she knew things without needing to ponder them, I realized that she wouldn't cry for anything anymore, because all things in the world were interconnected in such a way

that each was both cause and consequence of the other. Anyone who understood all those relationships—and women like Leticia were capable of constructing architectural universes of associations, and still not grasping them all—didn't need to mourn the loss of any of them, at most perhaps grieve. Everything is lost, and the new doesn't even possess the slightest resemblance to what is dead.

There are no consolations.

The only consolation is the coldness of knowledge itself, and acceptance is yet another form of wisdom. I'm not talking about wisdom, no. That implies a metaphysics of the soul.

Eriberta 's voice . She found us sitting in silence.

- What are you doing here? Come on.

He grabbed us by the hand and led us back to the house.

"These girls are a lost cause!" she said to anyone who would listen as she seated us in the main room to receive the condolences that would file past before the wake ended. But we slipped away again as soon as she stopped watching us. Since she was in charge of the arrangements, she went back and forth from the kitchen with glasses and drinks, discreet hors d'oeuvres, and occasionally asked the cleaning lady to do things, or answered the phone, which made her jump with each ring in the artificial silence of whispers and hushed conversations.

We went to a room that Leticia called the playroom, but which was actually her father's library and study. There were dozens of work folders on two desks separated by two sofas. On the desks were carousels of stamps, pencil holders, pencil sharpeners, bedside lamps, blotting paper, and inkwells—old and new things in an arrangement that was both chaotic and harmonious.

Then we heard the gunshots. Leticia ran to uncover the television, which was hidden behind the doors of one of the cabinets. When she turned it on, a news report was showing images of what was happening just a few meters from the house. The workers stationed at La Cantábrica were being gunned down as they left. The sound of the gunfire reached us through the windows, after piercing the foliage of the park, like hunters closing in.

3

Leticia ran to the window, and I stayed in front of the television. I told her what the journalists were saying, and she let me know if she could see anything between the tree trunks and the fence. I didn't think I could see anything from so far away, but it was clear that I was discovering something new about her each time, as if I had never really known her.
- Do you hear anything? They're saying here that some workers went out to get water from the tank and the soldiers shot at them.
-I know, Ceci, I can see it. They're lying on the patio floor, at the foot of the water tower.
- But how can you see them from here?
It was Renato's voice; he had come to check on us. Leticia turned around, startled. Aunt Eriberta and Dr. Farías appeared in the doorway.
"Renato, I'm going to see what's going on," he said.
-I'll go with you. Girls, don't leave here or look out the window.
-But sir...
-Nothing, there are always stray bullets...
The two of them went outside, and my aunt went inside and sat down in front of the television, trembling. She ignored us, not even when Leticia reopened the window and started telling me what was happening.
The journalists moved from one place to another on the property, trying to make progress. The camera shook, interrupting the broadcast, probably because the cameraman stumbled on the cobblestones of the sidewalk.
"She trips over the bodies," Leticia said.
She was sitting with her back against the frame.
Your father and the doctor went outside, I can see them now. The soldiers are blocking their path, but they're arguing, especially the doctor. He's taking documents out of his pocket and showing them to the soldiers. The soldiers are pointing their guns at your father. He says something to them, "Palomar," I think.

The aunt kept her eyes glued to the television, rubbing her hands together and lamenting that all this was happening today of all days. The others waited in the living rooms or the kitchen. Their voices could be heard, the women talking loudly, the men urging them to be quiet, but they too were talking loudly and pacing the patio, eager to see what was going on.
-The Tejada uncles want to go out... but the Martins are smoking and won't move from their armchairs.
- Hey , Leti, get in there and close the door !
It was the voice of great-uncle Baldomero shouting from the garden, a Martins , but a nobody, as I heard that afternoon. His sister was in charge of the funeral services, or rather, she ran the whole business they had inherited along with other partners.
Leticia ignored him and laughed. The old man sat back down to continue calmly smoking his cigar. The gunshots didn't affect him; perhaps he didn't even hear them in his advanced deafness. They must have been mere whistles, like those of the birds in the Ecuadorian jungle where they said he had lived.
Television had shown the corpses, but only for a second. The journalists couldn't reach where most of them were, and for many bodies they couldn't be sure they were dead, but simply crouching men who, hidden, were pointing towards the soldiers: were those raised arms, as if in defeat? And what did the eyes covered with the butt of a rifle represent: the imminent shot or the blow to the face?
The camera suddenly seemed to die, replaced by the intermittent lines of a broken broadcast, with indistinct background sounds, while the announcer on the channel apologized to the audience while uttering unintelligible phrases that had leaked out when they were supposed to be off-air. But amidst all the confusion, the microphones must have remained open, and shouts came from the television, and also from the window.
I looked at Leticia, who was standing on the edge. My aunt had left, locking the door behind her. My cousin was spying on tiptoe, as if she were peering over the trees. All I could see was the water tower and the pair of chimneys. Shouts were heard, and then suddenly the roar of the factory machinery.
"What's wrong?" I asked him.

They turned on the machines, I could always hear them from here. They made me fall asleep, you know , Ceci? They were like a choir…
-But what's happening? Do you see my dad?
-He's with the doctor, talking to one of the owners. He's my dad's cousin, I think it's Uncle Guillermo, yes, the big boss of the factory.
- But was your dad also an owner?
-I suppose so, like all the Martins .
He began to tell me, while I kept glancing into the distance, invisible to me, that the old family had arrived from Galicia almost a hundred years before. That they named the factory after the mountains. They were miners and knew how to extract metal from the rocks. But that was at the beginning; Leticia's father and the rest of his partners had exploited the industry later.
- But then what happened?
"Dad said everything went wrong when Perón came. The workers started to think they were more important than they were."
"And what are they?" I asked, anticipating her intellectual response, just as she could foresee the metaphysical future. Because that's what she did. What she told me was a mixture of the present and the immediate future. I had already noticed this when she recounted things that were happening on television before the images cut out. She probably didn't distinguish these subtle differences, which were simply the most rudimentary aspect of her ability. What would soon begin to bother her were the major events brewing in the hidden corners of reality. The turn of a corner that doesn't exist until you reach it.
I thought of Mom, so close to us in that area of western Buenos Aires. Renato must have been not only thinking about his wife, but also talking about her to his cousin Martins , because they were undoubtedly accusing her of complicity with the rest of the workers' resistance.
-Your dad is arguing with my uncle, the doctor is separating them.
Suddenly, more gunshots interrupt her. She, too, is startled. The machinery continues to operate, and the sound of metal arrives, raw at times, screeching almost always.
-But why did they start working now?
-How should I know…

Television resumed its broadcast. Now they were transmitting from the presidential palace. The Casa Rosada was surrounded by people, and Onganía appeared on the balcony with a circle of guards and aides. A journalist appeared on camera, microphone in hand; he was agitated and looked around as he spoke.

They *have ordered the resumption of operations at the Morón factory; the machinery has been restarted after a six-month shutdown. The national government is satisfied with the outcome of this conflict, which began with the disastrous corruption of the previous administration.*

After midday, Renato returned. He hugged me, and we sat down in front of the television. Leticia kept slipping away from Aunt Eriberta 's arms whenever she tried to take her to the living room with the others. The noises and movements at the factory continued like a chant: voices from loudspeakers ordering work, ambulance sirens that gradually faded as night fell, and the footsteps of soldiers on a permanent guard around the compound.

I heard Renato and Farías talking in hushed tones, sitting on the sofa, glancing sideways at the screen. The bodies in the morgues were still waiting for the closed streets to be reopened so the hearses could enter. Nothing was set yet, neither the time nor the events. Leticia had sat down next to me on a piano bench, her back hunched, slowly chewing a piece of pasta frola , seemingly engrossed in what was happening on the screen. Since they had come in, the window had been bolted shut and the heavy, dark curtains had cast a shadow over the bookcase. At eight o'clock that summer, while it was still bright outside, the gloom inside the study battled with the television. In the diffuse, flickering light, everyone's faces seemed unreal. Farías's suit had become a kind of uniform in dark or silver tones, and Renato's glasses gave off reflections or glimmers that made him look like a character from an adult comic strip. But what startled me most, to the point of making me step back a few inches, was Leticia's face. She was a woman now, with long, graying hair, and dressed in old clothes, like a homeless person. And I smelled the scent of the sea on those clothes.

Then Leticia heard the same thing I did. The men's conversation in the shadow of the armchair. The aroma of cigarettes and whiskey , and the disjointed, smoky smell of meat. Who had brought it with them, clinging to their clothes or hands?

"You didn't have to do that," said Sebastiano Farías' voice, tender as when he spoke to me, because he was speaking to his best friend.

- What do you want ? She used to talk about her like she was an extremist.

- And isn't it?

-You know , like a criminal…

- And isn't it?

- Which side are you on?

-From friends, of course, but the law is the law.

-That changes according to the color of the curtains in the government house.

Farías laughed. The cigarette's light went out in an ashtray.

-Let's agree, my friend, that Martins can do what he wants, it's been his factory for a hundred years.

-But the men are not yours.

-They belong to whoever pays them. Just ask the workers.

-I can't if they're dead.

I coughed.

"What are you eating, Ceci?" Renato asked.

-Just some cookies.

"If they're the dry ones the old woman served us... run them through with water." Sebastiano's voice was kind and comforting.

But I knew it wasn't the cookies or the pasta frola that had made me cough, but the memory of that afternoon, before they returned. Leticia was sitting at the window, crying. I thought that, finally, she was crying for her parents. I had gone over to comfort her.

-Calm down, Leti...

She looked at me, angry.

- How can I stay calm if I see them lying there?

- To whom?

-To the men at the factory, you idiot.

She hadn't left her room all afternoon, and hadn't even seen the fleeting images on television. They hadn't given the number of wounded, because there weren't any, only dead, and that came later.

Sixty *-one. I counted them, you know . They died at one in the afternoon, all of them against the tank's columns. They were tied up when they went out to get water. Like in the besieged cities they teach us about in history class at school.*

"Are you trying to tell me what I was supposed to do..." Renato's voice continued, blending with Leticia's old voice, which had been echoing in the walls for hours before? "...if she spoke of me as the one responsible for the resistance that was emerging after the darkness to rehabilitate the struggle of her dead husband?"

- But was it necessary for you to go in there?

A man walked over them and lifted their heads to look at their faces, as if he knew them. It seemed to me that he was trying to commit them to memory, as if he intended to describe them later. I saw his face, with glasses, thin, sooty hands .

The chalk, perhaps, with which he would try to write the names of the dead on some blackboard much later. Or maybe the stain that remains on the skin when we touch flesh burned by bullets.

"I know it all seemed very theatrical, and I'm embarrassed. But that's how I am when I'm angry. I couldn't help but recognize them..."

- As if you were one of his family? Come on, Renato, that's what I call writing literature...

- So what? What's written lasts longer than meat, right?

Martins 's office .

-And tell me, what did you gain from that? If I don't convince them, they'll arrest you, and what will happen to Ceci then?

-I know, do you think I'm not grateful? But at least I got my revenge by showing Martins that we know what his brother or cousin or whatever the hell he is did to the workers.

"Do you think they give a damn? You're a pathetic idealist, Renato. At least your wife is more practical. She only fights when she knows she has a chance of winning."

-He's in jail…
-That's precisely what fighting and winning is all about. In these governments, those on the outside have no say; they're puppets who change with whichever way the wind blows.
- Just like you, Sebastiano!
-Don't talk nonsense. I'm a ship, my dear, that survives shipwrecks.
"That's what they call the ship of state, isn't it? Where men like Martins get on board , betraying others to gain an advantage. Those who don't work, boom! And the machines run again. And you know what makes them run? Fear, Sebastiano."
- What a discovery, man! You deserve the Nobel Prize, my friend.
And Renato continued talking in a low voice until after midnight. The television, now off, had nothing left to report. The country was in order. But he counted in numbers, up to sixty-one, and then started again. He pronounced my mother's name after each ten, and began again with one, isolated and alone. Renato whimpered from the distress and the effects of the whiskey , in the middle of the night. When it was three in the morning, Sebastiano was holding him again, trying to comfort him.
Leticia, lying on the rug at the foot of the desk on which the folders with the names of companies and important men threatened to fall on top of her, knew that I was also listening to that long soliloquy between two men who scorned the world in which they lived.

4

I woke up at seven in the morning, I think. The men were gone, and so was Leticia. Alone, I turned on the television. The broadcast hadn't started yet. I opened the curtain and the sun streamed in, shattering the structures of darkness, and the noise of the factory machinery seemed to reconstruct the world of the room: the buildings of books, the plains of the living room , the

stations of the desks. I was hungry, and I felt sweaty and dirty. The day promised to be as hot, if not hotter, than the last.
I went outside and walked down the hall to the kitchen. The cook greeted me with a "good morning, miss".
"Where is everyone?" I asked.
-They're still arguing, haven't they found out yet?
- About what?
The streets haven't been open for days; it's a government order. They won't let us in or out. And we're stuck with the dead inside!
Then I heard voices arguing at the park entrance. Everyone was talking at once and surrounding a man in a suit who looked like a typical government official. Outside, on the sidewalk, there were soldiers with rifles. Leticia came running up to me from there.
- What's happening?
They're closing the streets and the funeral home can't get in. But they'll all find a way to leave.
By afternoon, it wasn't just the closest relatives left. Ten in all. Renato said we had to wait until they allowed us in. That evening, we gathered in the main room, a large space with several armchairs and low tables. Some were reading, others playing dice. Aunt Eriberta seemed happy to host this little get-together, which would have been perfect if not for the stench of dead flowers, which were soon thrown onto the sidewalk. But the next day, the smell of decay persisted, and we all knew where it was coming from. From the rooms with the coffins, of course, but even in the park, the smell was even stronger. It didn't bother me too much; I don't know why. Perhaps the sweet smell of rotting flesh was something innate in my body, like the memory of bones, or perhaps the memory of muscles. Leticia's peculiarity lay in her intellectual understanding of time and the world. Her body was healthy, as she demonstrated for a long time afterward, and that's why she was able to endure and process the consequences of that knowledge, which few could tolerate. However, I was unable to see beyond my present; my body limited me to that, and it was precisely this circumstance that turned my body into a net that trapped tragedy and transformed it into illness. And pain, then,

remembers itself like an old relative who visits us from time to time, until one day it no longer wants to leave.
The smell drifted from the factory, crossing the street and overcoming the dampness of the park's foliage and the gasoline fumes from the cars a few blocks away, continuing their usual routines. I would shut myself in the nursery, and Leticia would keep me company all afternoon, walking along the paths among the plants, under the watchful eye of the gardener who tried to undress us with his gaze.
"The cranes came," he said, as he smashed some azaleas in an attempt to transplant them.
We tried to avoid it, but it was no use. We had to ask.
-To raise the dead, what's the point?
It was true. We went to the entrance and peered through the gate. A bulldozer was working on the factory grounds, dumping its excavated material into large containers. It was dirt, apparently, along with stones and pieces of masonry. But the smell wafted up and down, accompanied by the swarms of flies.
Four days passed. The barriers blocking Lamadrid, between Azcuénaga and Rawson, were lifted. Aunt Eriberta answered the phone.
-They arrive early tomorrow.
It was ten o'clock at night. The chess game between Farías and Renato was interrupted by the announcement. The great-uncle woke up startled, and although he hadn't heard it, it was clear he had dreamed it.

The hearses arrived in the morning. They loaded the coffins. Behind them, three or four more cars with wreaths. And then the small procession of family members.
"Where are we going?" I asked Renato, who was next to me, and Leticia, who was on the other side. Until then, I had assumed we were going to the Morón cemetery.
-To Flores, Ceci, to the San José de Flores cemetery. That's where the family mausoleum is.
- Pantheon? Oh, yes, sorry.
-It doesn't matter, Ceci. It's like a big house for bodies.

Farías, who was next to me, said:
-And where everyone maintains an enviable silence, except for the cockroaches who talk about God.
They both spoke without a care for hurting Leticia's feelings. Apparently, she had none. No one had ever seen her cry for her parents, and the tears she shed for the workers a few hours later seemed merely theatrical weeping of someone who knew she was being watched because she considered herself special. I was already becoming enraged by this difference she exploited to her advantage: Aunt Eriberta 's condescension , and the silences of Papa and Farías, which they used to try to conceal what, in the end, didn't seem to affect her at all: her father's business dealings and their consequences for the men in his factory. That night I had watched her closely in the darkness, lying on the rug that had been trodden by Eber Martins ' shoes , almost caressing it with my cheek, as if I could hear her father's voice giving the order to repress the workers by any means necessary and replace them with those who wanted to work. I too listened to Sebastiano Farías's story, which had begun in the darkness of the studio that night, interrupted by Renato's sleep and resumed in the car that was slowly moving along Rivadavia Avenue.
"As I told you, Renato, Eber did what he could to overcome his men's resistance. He fired the first few, but when they refused to leave and occupied the factory, he brought in those who would work on a piece-rate basis. He wasn't too surprised when they also rebelled, because there were many left-wing infiltrators. So he practically starved them, preventing the women and children from having any contact with them. He cut the telephone lines and, with soldiers at the gates, prohibited the entry of any supplies. Then he tried barracks diplomacy and later media diplomacy, resorting to television to convince what he called 'the people' that the barricaded workers were murderous communists. And he almost won with that soft approach. But then summer came, and what did he think of? Taking his family on vacation as if nothing had happened. It was part of the strategy, of course, but he botched it, as they say now. The thirty or so men had grown to more than fifty." They were hungry and thirsty, and some women had come in to convince their men to give in.
- But did they know that Martins was already dead?

"How should I know! I want to believe not, because then they wouldn't have gone out to fetch water from the tank. Dead dog, no more rabies—that's what they should have thought first thing if they'd heard about Martins , and then they would have held out a little longer. Which wasn't a guarantee, of course, but it would have meant a lot to them."

Not many hours had passed since the news arrived from the coast.

But the battery-powered radios must have been dead by now, and they had no electricity. I don't think they noticed. It was the heat, I'm sure. Those who came out were almost naked and very thin.

-It was a real place, just like in the old days.

-Yes, dear, just like in the early days of civilization, right?

The sarcasm was a sharp, cold, and precise edge in the middle of the car. Leticia listened in silence, her gaze fixed behind the closed windows of the Fairlane, seemingly taking in the businesses along the avenue: Haedo, Ramos Mejía, Ciudadela. When we arrived in Liniers, we crossed General Paz and the car turned onto Juan B. Justo. And at that precise moment, she began to scream.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, overlooking previous clues in this story whose essence is precisely time, because that was my cousin Leticia's gift. Without time, she was nothing. Her mind was a labyrinth where the Minotaur beast came and went as if it were many at once, and Leticia pursued it, trying to sketch out the diagram of time, where space was nothing more than one of the multiple planes of the schemes she intended to outline. And like any sketch, it would be erased and redrawed to have an ephemeral life of its own. A little while earlier, when we were walking through downtown Rivadavia, she asked:

- Is Maldonado below?

We looked at her curiously, all except the driver, who regarded her with a sneer. Perhaps she smelled something too? Because Leticia was literally sniffing the air around her. We were, of course, following the car with the coffins, but the smells from the street had masked the odor we'd grown so accustomed to during our stay at the house. We did the same as her, but we didn't smell anything.

"Yes, more or less," Renato told him. "The Maldonado River originates near San Justo, and it's been intubated in this area for a long time."
- And how far does it go?
-In the capital, it runs under Juan B. Justo Avenue and drains into the river. Why?
-It's such a strong smell that it comes from the sewers.
She rolled down the window and pointed to the drains in the gutters on both sides of the avenue. Then she covered her nose, and her eyes watered from the stench. We didn't smell a thing.
" Close it , dear," said the driver.
It was when we turned onto Juan B. Justo that she started screaming. At first, it was a shriek that we thought would break her vocal cords, but we underestimated her. With each successive scream, which grew louder, she began to kick. Farías tried to restrain her, but no matter how hard he held her arms, she kicked the front seat. The driver stopped and got out of the car. He opened the back door and slapped my cousin. Renato and Farías were furious. There were insults thrown from both sides, and then I recognized the driver: he was the gardener from the Martins ' house .
She realized I had recognized him, but as if it were common practice in those days for men to have two or more jobs, none of them said anything, if indeed they knew him too. Leticia shut her mouth after the slap and glared at him angrily.
"You're going to end up like them," he told her.
"What's your name?" Farías asked, pulling out a notebook, threatening and meticulous as only he could be.
-Oscar Méndez, sir…- he said, using the “sir” as if he had said a bad word.
The other cars in the caravan had pulled over to the side of the avenue, their hazard lights flashing, while the surrounding traffic honked. Drivers were either swearing or simply making the sign of the cross. Another driver had arrived and asked what was happening. They explained. Then they spoke apart, on the sidewalk, leaning against a wall, while pedestrians stopped to watch.
"I'll continue the service," said the newcomer. Méndez went to the other car.

As we were about to go up, Leticia approached a water outlet on the curb, got on all fours and put her face close to the drain.
"Leti!" I shouted.
- They're there, Ceci! There are so many, Ceci. They want to get out.
We all heard her, even Méndez had come closer again. The relationship between them went beyond simple animosity; something had happened, and although I didn't dare admit it, later I would be sure.
Only a few hours had passed since the shooting and the end of the factory uprising. The radio news, now playing in the car, reported that the rebels were imprisoned in Ezeiza awaiting a judge's decision. Each of them would receive a fair trial, said the voice of the journalist on duty, her voice syrupy, like so many of the runway models who took over the news in those confusing times, typical of the chaotic mess so many sang about but no one understood. How could one understand the distorted principles when even the simplest, most traditional roles had been reversed?
Of the family, only Aunt Eriberta arrived now, after walking the two hundred meters from where the other car had stopped. She grabbed Leticia by the arm and began to drag her. She was fed up with these whims, she said.
"Leave her alone, ma'am, please." The aunt yielded to the only voice she seemed to respect. Farías squatted beside Leticia, stroked her face, and dried her tears.
"What's wrong?" he asked.
"The men, Mr. Farías, are down there. All of them from the factory. I know them; they used to wave to me from the doorway as they came in and out. The women would come with their children when their shifts were over. They'd wave to me, and I didn't know their names, but I know their voices. And I can hear them now, shouting as they float face up in that deep river down there." He pointed at the drain with his outstretched arm, his fingers trembling.
-They're calling me.
He lay down on the cobblestones and put one ear to the ground.
-Listen, Mr. Farías.
The congressman, a young and already promising politician, knelt on the cobblestones and pressed his ear to them. Perhaps he heard something through the cracks, but he could never say whether it was his imagination or

a premonition of what happened later. Once again, time confounds this story as it confounds everything.

"I can't hear anything," he told Leticia. Whether it was a lie or the truth didn't matter; his response was the result of uncertainty about the pain of that twelve-year-old girl, or was it the woman?, which would never be calmed. She looked at him, distressed.

"Not even the smell? It's awful, doctor..." His face contorted in disgust. "They're trying to swim in putrid waters."

Leticia vomited right there in the street. She hadn't eaten anything, and had only had some tea with milk that morning. The vomit, however, was copious and had an acrid, unbearable smell that made everyone around her cover their noses.

It was the typical smell of carrion.

They cleaned his face and gave him mineral water from the bottle we had in the car that afternoon in the oppressive heat. The driver said:

"Shall we go, gentlemen?" It was undoubtedly a Gonçalvez, a farmhand for Gamaliel, the pompous and, above all, enigmatic name of the funeral home organizing the entire ceremony for one of the members of his extended family. But it was all in honor of the Martins , of course, and not the Tejadas. Over time, I learned that each letter corresponds to the surname of the founding families; the "m" refers to the Martins , of course, one of the surviving families, along with the Arriagas, for example, from Entre Ríos and Santa Fe, the Arangurens in the central-western part of Buenos Aires province, the Larrierees in the mid-east, and the Gonçalves, of course, who are like a plague everywhere, especially in Brazil and Uruguay. That's what I heard when we resumed our journey to the Flores cemetery. The drive along Juan B. Justo Avenue was short, but sufficiently illustrative—tragically illustrative, I must say.

Dr. Farías had lifted Leticia in his arms and carried her to the car. For half an hour she slept in his arms, as if she were the daughter he never had, or at least never acknowledged, because it was known that Don Sebastiano was an unrepentant womanizer, but too discreet, too attractive and well-mannered, a mind overflowing with culture in every word and every gesture of his hands, for the women who were his victims to be so different from him as to slander

him, demanding something he himself hadn't first taken upon himself to fulfill. If he had children, they were his without the world needing to know; simply by looking at them, perhaps someone would recognize it, in the attractiveness of their faces, the shape of their bodies, or the refinement of their manners. Leticia and I, then, each leaned on the men who accompanied us. They weren't our real fathers, but they deserved the name.

The grim scene at the San José de Flores cemetery that afternoon, shrouded in gray clouds and thick with the most dreadful humidity I had ever felt, gave us no reason to leave the car. But the coffins were being unloaded from the other vehicles, and if the dead were willing to expose themselves to that climate that would hasten their decomposition, why shouldn't we, alive and dripping with sweat from every pore of our sticky skin?

A funeral in summer is the most abstruse thing one can experience.

The flies are the only honored guests, the ones who organize the choreography of the restless hands of the relatives of the deceased, the ones who give the rhythm of the clapping on the skin in furious taps, and the ones who buzz like a deleterious Gregorian choir as a background to the murmurs and the inexhaustible responses.

The funeral of Eber Martins and Manuela Tejada was a comedy disguised as tragedy. None of those present could stomach the priest's words, drawn from the Old Testament—a dichotomy I neither understood nor gave the necessary weight to at the time, and which are elements for another story that I'm not meant to tell. My protagonist is my cousin Leticia, who stood there beside her parents' coffins, holding hands with Dr. Farías. That man in a crisp suit who never smelled bad, whose body was a kind of amalgam destroyed and rebuilt every instant, and therefore never accumulated odor or perspiration. So many times I saw him place his hand on his thin stomach that I could make out, beneath his waistcoat, the watch chain crossing it not as an ornament, but as if it were trapping him. So that something, inside or underneath, wouldn't escape.

That was my first thought as I watched him standing there, erect, the only man who truly understood Leticia's gift, if I can call it that. The only one who believed her before seeing and confirming what she had predicted. And the scent hung in the air, forming images of smoke and war.

Thanks to the priest's silence, we overheard the news coming from the car radio, blasting at full volume, as if Oscar Méndez, the gardener-driver and presumably capable of other professions of uncertain and dubious value, were deaf. The news announced the massive demonstration of workers marching from downtown Buenos Aires toward the western outskirts of the capital to protest the still-unexplained tragic events . They were walking along Juan B. Justo Avenue, which largely formed the roof of the Maldonado building, all of them deaf to the screams Leticia insisted she'd heard the dead utter.

5

When we returned to the house after the funeral, I told Papa Renato that we couldn't just leave Leticia like that. He was eager to resume visiting Mama, but he said I was right. Since we were near El Palomar, I would go that afternoon. If Mama was well, we would stay a few more days, who knows, however long it took to see if my cousin recovered. Farías had carried her, asleep and exhausted, to the bedroom and laid her down. Aunt Eriberta and others told him they would take care of her, but Leticia protested and cried whenever they touched her. She only calmed down with the doctor's hands. Sebastiano Farías couldn't have been more than forty years old. He was, as they say, in the prime of his manhood. He exuded composure and strength from his hands and his neatly shaved face; even his short sideburns invited one to touch them, soft and serving as a prelude to the barely-long hair that tucked behind his ears. The scent of fine tobacco always accompanied him, enveloping his shoulders and legs with a seemingly slow gait that was nothing more than self-assurance and certainty. However, when he listened to others, his facial expressions betrayed both interest and doubt, as if he were not only sharing their concerns but also trying to offer a satisfactory solution. If he found one, he offered it as just another comment so as not to offend; if not, he remained silent or said, "Very interesting, let me think about it for a moment."

It wasn't surprising that Leticia's brief relationship with him turned into a kind of Oedipus complex; the same thing had happened to me with Renato. Sebastiano was the father Leticia should have had, and the husband she would never have.
Aunt Eriberta , jealous, would say to her, sitting at the foot of my cousin's bed while watching her sleep:
-You are a very busy man, doctor, let the women take care of the girl.
Farías, lighting a cigarette by the window, through which the once again familiar sound of machinery was entering, said to him in the tone of someone who does not intend to offend anyone:
-Sometimes, women need men, ma'am.
I was afraid, I, who was also in the room, holding Leticia's hand, the only woman he didn't reject. I thought of Méndez, perhaps listening from a distance in the park, used to looking out at that window through which Farías now heard the six o'clock siren announcing the end of the workday and the workers' imminent departure. In twenty-four hours, what had been disrupted for six months had returned to routine. The factory walls weren't blind, only the men who passed by and barely peeked over the top, afraid to see what they didn't want to see, because what isn't seen isn't known, and utter ignorance is the last bastion, perhaps the most impregnable, of ignominy.
That night, as on the following nights while we stayed, I slept in the same bed as Leticia, but we were still having dinner in the room. She didn't want to finish her plate and had fallen asleep again. A family doctor, I think he was one of Farías's cousins, had examined her, assuring us that she was simply distressed and that we should leave her alone. "Boys are stronger than we think," he said, and Sebastiano thanked him for such a subtle diagnosis. Since they didn't get along, the doctor left without saying goodbye.
We were almost in the dark despite the bedside lamp next to the bed.
- Do you think she knows?
He looked at me from the armchair, with an open book in his hands, pretending to read, I think, although his mind was vibrating on different planes at the same time.

"Willful ignorance is the worst of all, Cecilia. It cannot be defeated. It is more unyielding than death. Leticia knows no limits. She may see mists, but at some point they always clear. It's a very heavy burden for a little girl."
-We girls grow up, doctor.
-I know, luckily that's how it is. As women, they outlive us.
- Mom's going out, isn't she? Are you going to take her out?
"Of course. Your mother is a rock, she belongs to this urban land, stubborn and childish, ignorant and wicked. She likes to fight against concrete, for example, the walls of this factory that now sleeps its iron sleep. But Leti is above it all, she sees everything and can't come down and ignore it like the others at ground level. She's made of water, perhaps, or she's air."
- Aren't they the same thing?
-Exactly, Cecilia. We are the carbon in our bones, she is oxygen and hydrogen. We are opaque, she is transparent, but I mean from the inside out. We live in a cave with walls that rarely or never crack, she is a crystal glass that shatters or rattles.
Who was Congressman Sebastiano Farías? A politician? A freethinker? The sum of his talents was only truly appreciated after knowing him for a long time and penetrating the multiple layers of his discourse.

Renato had returned happy, if you can call it that, from his visit to Mom. He told me she was very proud of me, of how I cared for and worried about my cousin. And that I should put my worries about her aside, that in prison she felt comfortable with all those political prisoners to whose class she belonged. Renato repeated it to me verbatim, knowing it would have the opposite effect on me, and that this was precisely Mom's intention. That's how I inherited that way of thinking, so close to sarcasm, so rebellious against conventional wisdom, but in me, those structures of intellectual thought were always weakened by the waters of pessimism, or rather bitterness, which rots the foundations.
Farías said, two days later, that he had to return to Congress to meet a *quorum.* indispensable to her party, and for other pending matters. Leticia was already better, eating and going to the park, but she had deep, dark circles under her eyes, where her eyes seemed to want to plunge into the

abyss. It was a strange sensation, tempting me to imagine a scene from a bad horror movie, reaching into the empty sockets to rescue her eyes from those deep abysses.

Was Leticia crazy, or was what she claimed to see true? That, ultimately, is the central theme of this long narrative. Much later, I realized that her gift wasn't solely and completely seeing the future, but seeing what others cannot see: images that could have been the past or be the future, but which lie dormant in the present. That's the material with which people like Leticia work; everything exists only in the present, because it's the only thing that truly exists, and it can't even be touched or grasped.

How long does an instant last?

February had begun. The family had already left; only Aunt Eriberta remained with her endless complaints, and Méndez, who wandered around the park with his pruning shears, his boots crunching on the dry leaves. Renato and I were temporary guests, a nuisance to Aunt's possessiveness. I know she spoke daily with Grandpa Martins , informing him of every detail about the house, lowering her voice when she spoke of us. During those days, the telephone never stopped ringing or being used, both by her and by Renato, who spoke with Sebastiano every night. Aunt would pass by and cast a disapproving glance, thinking about the phone bill, which was undoubtedly just an excuse for her inherent stinginess.

One night, after we finished talking, Renato came to say goodnight before going to bed. He was coming back from talking with Farías, and he seemed worried.

- Did something happen to Mom?

-Nothing, Ceci, everything is going smoothly on that front.

- So what's wrong with you?

Sebastiano sounded unwell, like he was tired. I even thought, or it seemed to me, that he was about to cry. It's those lumps that form in your throat, you know?

-Yes, Dad, I understand.

Renato took off his glasses and looked at me with those blue eyes that seemed to crest like waves of two raging seas, a fury born of powerlessness in the face of whatever disturbed the tranquility of his world. At that moment, he

wasn't my adoptive father, but my mother's husband, and I wanted to hug him and rock his head against my chest to give him permission to cry. However, neither he nor I had permission to do what we wanted.

6

By July, everything seemed to have returned to normal, if that's what I can call the fragile state of the interwar period. Onganía's government survived by exploiting its own impotence through arrogance. Some said Perón would return to power very soon; the political climate was already being prepared for his return. Meanwhile, the revolts continued in the universities, and the unions and labor guilds were fighting amongst themselves.
The workers at La Cantábrica kept working and didn't give anyone anything to talk about. Nobody knew them, and they didn't speak to the press. "Who were they?" cried the silent letters of some leftist pamphlets that could never be completely destroyed; they always turned up on some street corner, even if hours later everyone was found burned alive in a charred 12CV. The bodies weren't mentioned; they never existed in the official versions of that summer's events. These versions claimed that the participants in the revolt had been reinstated, and a few others fired, with no one knowing their whereabouts. But everyone knew they weren't the same men, and the number sixty-one took on a subversive propaganda slant, while also acquiring a bizarre, lottery-like color: 61 was "the shotgun." Thus, both symbols cleverly combined; the popular merged with the rebellious. That was what the government disliked.
Farías had been away during February, on vacation, he'd told my parents. Mom had been released on February 14th. Her file was clean, Farías said, and it had been a real struggle to get rid of those folders. Unfortunately, the men who remembered her were still in power, and there was nothing he could do about it. She thanked him for all his efforts, of course; she didn't really have any words to offer him other than the same old ones. She probably would have liked to hug him, but despite everything, they were still on opposite

sides of the same system. When they met, an inevitable spark of ideological conflict would fly; however, she, the warrior, would condescend, and he, the intellectual, would accommodate her. Both were smart enough to survive a war that would never end. That was the Argentine government, whoever was temporarily in power: a war zone where stupidity reigned and folly was the law.

"The law is an anachronism," he once told his mother, shortly after she returned home. "We raise up leaders and tear down the walls of the law."

-And we built highways…

-Yes, they are imposing, and the best thing is that nobody sees where they end, it can be a thousand kilometers away or two blocks away, when they connect deserts.

"You, my friend, my dear friend," he said, squeezing his hands with his own, gratefully. "You don't say that in your speeches."

He laughed.

"Of course not, or do you want me dead? Do you think they don't know about my visits to this house? They tolerate it because I'm a tomb. I have a family that protects me, but also forces me. Sometimes…"

-Sometimes you wish you could annihilate yourself, don't you?

It was the first time I heard Mom talk about anything resembling suicide. She, who was so strong, also knew how futile her constant fighting was.

Then Sebastiano Farías disappeared from our lives for a few months. We listened to his speeches on the radio, and we read news about him, very sporadically. In May, rumors began to circulate that he was leading a government-appointed commission tasked with quelling several student and worker uprisings. He appeared on television news, surrounded by many civilian collaborators and guarded by soldiers as he entered hostile factories. He would occasionally call, because he didn't want Renato or Mama to call him, in case the lines were being monitored. He was beyond good and evil, as he liked to say. "I'm comfortable in both heaven and hell," that phrase, uttered one day during that fateful summer, is etched in my memory. And in those calls, he spoke in codes that Renato revealed to me much later. They used colloquial, everyday words that nevertheless referred to government officials or specific events.

One day in June, the 20th, I think, when I had returned from the school event, I found Renato standing next to the phone, which was hanging off. I asked him what was wrong. He ignored me, but answered the same question my mother had asked. He answered aloud, as if lost in thought.
-He got involved in stirring up the issue of La Cantábrica.
He paused.
"It's too tempting for him to have those files so close and not spy on them, don't you think?" That's what he told me.
"Don't worry, it's a chameleon..." said Mom.
I couldn't help but laugh, imagining a chameleon standing upright on its tail, as tall as Dr. Farías, in a suit and smoking, like in a Disney movie (the Disney before it sold out). They looked at me.
"I think you're wrong, " Renato said. "Sebastiano is like a cockroach. He goes into the worst places and always comes out unscathed."

On the holiday of July 9th, the doorbell rang at midnight. I heard Mom's slippers on the dining room floor and the creaking of the door, so undiscreet. Then, the sound of the hinges closing, a man's groan, and my mother's muffled scream. I got up and ran; Renato was already there with them. Sebastiano was clinging to her, but then I realized she was actually holding him up so he wouldn't fall. Between the two of them, they sat him down on the sofa, lifted his legs, and asked him again and again what had happened. He was wearing one of his usual suits, but with torn elbows, his vest open, and no tie. Mom took off his mud-caked shoes, and that's when I noticed the smell. It wasn't just mud, but shit, and his whole body was covered in it and other things. A smell of rotten things, long torn to pieces and eaten by rats, and the rats by the cats on Juan B. Justo Avenue, the same ones that roamed the sidewalks at night and wandered into houses and apartments as if they owned the place.
Renato picked him up.
"I'll take care of it, you prepare something for him to eat. He's so thin..." Her voice broke.
He took him to the bathroom and closed the door a crack. I could hear the sound of the shower running and Renato's comforting words amidst Farías's

moans and whimpers. I saw them clearly through one of the mirrored panels of the medicine cabinet above the sink. Farías's face was smeared with grime, his beard overgrown, he barely opened his eyes, and his head swung like a pendulum as if his neck muscles couldn't hold it up. Renato carefully removed his clothes because he knew how much his friend valued his garments, even though they were no longer usable. I only caught a glimpse of him naked from behind as Renato helped him into the shower. We didn't have a bathtub, so he had to get in and hold him while he scrubbed him with a soapy sponge. Suddenly, I heard a loud noise; they had both fallen. I asked if they were alright. "Yes," Renato replied, and asked me to get some towels and leave them on the floor by the door.

A little while later, they both came out. Farías was wearing one of Renato's bathrobes, and Renato was in his wet pajamas. They went to the room that served as an office, and she laid him down on the armchair that sometimes also served as a bed. Mama brought out some soup, the smell of which couldn't overcome the decay that had invaded the house. The smell still lingered on the shoes and clothes, on the floor with the imprints of dirty socks, on the fabric of the dining room sofa. It was the same aroma I would smell for years to come, feeling ashamed that they had invited them in and that they smelled the same. But they didn't, or pretended not to. Mama fed him the soup with spoons, and Renato rubbed his back to warm him up. It was July, as I said, and the stove only heated a couple of square meters, and we only had one for the bedroom. Farías was feeling warm, but little by little the soup took effect.

"I gave him a strong sedative," Mom said in a low voice.

When he fell asleep, they went to bed. I followed them, but I stayed in my bed, thinking, in the dark. The smell of the sewers was strong, and I had never imagined it could be so strong simply because I only ever smelled the smell that came from the bathroom or street drains. It was a different story to be in the middle of the sewers. That's what Farías had done; there was no other explanation. He had gone down, perhaps, into the Maldonado tunnels—but why? I remembered Leticia, lying on the cobblestones and staring at the dark opening of the drain in the curb. She had smelled exactly what I was

smelling now, with all the intensity that we didn't feel at that moment, perhaps because she wasn't even there yet.
The only one who had believed him was Dr. Farías, the pettifogger who read poetry and fantasized about tragedies that hadn't happened, the one who, while speaking of reality, also constructed it to his liking. He was like an architect capable of building an opera house, but who had been hired to design the shantytowns that would populate the country.
Beneath the rock, the sloshing of mud.
I needed to see him again, to know if he needed anything. Some of Leticia's infatuation had rubbed off on me. She had already forgotten, shut away in her house in Haedo, planning what she would do much later: go to the house on the coast, rid herself of everything, and atone for her sins (hers? her parents'?). I had transferred my strange longing for Renato to this man capable of venturing into hell to verify what a twelve-year-old girl had told him he would find beneath the streets, many months before.
I went to the room and saw his shadow in the darkness. I turned on the bedside lamp, as dim as all the little lamps we had at home to save electricity. He was still asleep. His lips were swollen and sore. His open robe revealed his bristly chest with light hair. He wasn't wearing underwear, of course, but I didn't look at what I shouldn't have, or perhaps I would have if something else hadn't caught my eye. Sebastiano Farías's abdomen was covered in scars. Surgeries? I approached. They weren't scars, but open wounds. I told myself he must have gotten them that night, wherever he'd been; they might even have been rat bites. But they were long and clean, and the edges were thickened, as if they hadn't been closed for a long time. Then I saw something moving at the bottom of the wounds. It wasn't blood or infected secretions. I knew them very well after having treated Papa Tejada so many times.
They were the intestines beneath a transparent layer filled with a network of veins. The intestines, which moved like restless vipers.

7

Farías stayed home all week, mostly lying in bed. He didn't read, just smoked one cigarette after another and watched television—only the news—getting up constantly to change the channel, searching for one that was advertising something specific. The desk remained closed, with the windows and blinds drawn, because he said the light hurt him. He still wore the same bathrobe, which he didn't even close when he left his room to go to the bathroom at the end of the hall. Winter break was over, and Mom and Renato had returned to their respective shifts, so they weren't home for most of the day. I would come home from school, air out the smoke-filled rooms a bit by opening the windows, and then make lunch for him and me. Then he would get up, tie his bathrobe, and sit down to eat at the table. It was the only consideration he showed us during those days, and he did it only for me, he said. I watched him cut the meat with a fork, like an old man lost in senility, and it saddened me so much to see him changed like that. I wondered if he would ever be the same again.

That night, Mom and Renato argued. She knew I owed Farías money, but her neglect wasn't good for me, she said. I wanted to intervene, but that would have meant raising my voice and arguing. Renato nodded, but he's my friend, he said, the only one I really have. I knew that night would end all that tearful passion Farías seemed to revel in.

Around noon, I heard Renato enter the office, then the flickering of the television and the abrupt click of the knob turning it off. They were undoubtedly going to talk.

I got up automatically, as if my presence in that room were obvious. After all, I had looked after him for most of the day that entire week. When I went to knock on the half-open door, I stopped. The two men were sitting on the sofa. Farías was still reclining, but with his feet on the floor, and Renato wasn't leaning back. I had just turned thirteen. Was I a girl or a woman? Without knowing for sure, I knew that my place wasn't to witness their conversation. However, I needed to listen, and the first words Farías uttered became claws of curiosity that slowly began to shape my connection to those events. There are places we've never been, and yet we remember them; there are events we've never witnessed, yet there is the relentless *déjà vu* . There are also

things that will never be strange to us, things from the past or present that seemingly don't belong to us, but that suddenly, on a certain uncertain day, become the essence of our lives. How do they transform our sense of belonging in that way? One day they belong to someone else, they don't move us, they don't sadden us. Then, they are ours, we have lived and felt them, and they unexpectedly constitute the architecture of our memory.
That's what I started hearing, and it all began with the mention of a name that meant nothing to me.
"They've got me under surveillance, Renato. For months, maybe years. You know it , all this coming and going from your house was the last straw. That's why they appointed me president of the commission, and it was all Colonel Ansaldi's idea, that guy from La Plata, a son of a bitch who undermined many of his friends to get promoted to colonel at twenty-eight, to be etched in the army's annals without a doubt. They wanted me safe, by the balls, drowning in pain if they could, all the better. At first, everything was very nice and proper , statistics, factory and employee names, a whole file to use as future blacklists. A bureaucratic waste of time and nothing more. But I've known them forever, and the shady dealings would soon surface, financial ones, of course, arrangements with the factory owners and the union bosses. Government, corporations, and unions, a lovely trio that no one with even the slightest imagination ever tires of."
Farías got up and went to look for the silver lighter on the desk, but couldn't find it even after feeling around in the dim light from the bedside lamp. He returned to the sofa, sighed, exhausted, and finally found it in his dressing gown pocket.
-In that bookish work, I found the file with the report on La Cantábrica, the official one, of course. In short, the entire procedure had been completely by the book, both the government's intervention and the way in which the rebel workers were reinstated. There were no deaths, though there were warning shots fired when some of the mutineers seemed to resist, but in the sight of the women and children, they gave in. So what did we see from Haedo's house?
-You know what we saw.
- You're sure?

-Sometimes the eyes lie, Sebastiano, but I still have the sensation of the bodies on the soles of my feet, as I walked on them.
A privileged, honorable feeling, worthy of a soldier, like on those memorable battlefields. But I'm a lawyer, a member of the Chamber of Deputies representing the ruling party, even if it's all just a facade and *a facade* . I'm too useful to them, or rather, I was, so they needed to guarantee my loyalty. Actually, they do it with everyone. There's no collaborator who isn't under suspicion. Everyone gets their bribes, some in cash, others in secrets. Anyway, there was that report that I didn't need to spend months researching and interviewing, or even draft. It was already done, ready to be signed and sent to the official archives of the Nation. Until I signed it, it was nothing more than a draft, just like my life. I saw it clearly that afternoon at two, after lunch at the Confitería del Molino. I asked to be left alone in my office. I stayed until five…no, until seven, because it was already dark. I looked at the Plaza from my window, the fountain and the monument to the Two Congresses. You might say it was a sentimental outburst, incongruous with my nature. That's true, but when it comes to life, everything is either rosy or black.
Sebastiano placed his hand on Renato's knee.
-My dear friend, you are the only one who never asked me for anything, that's why I gave you everything.
- What do you mean? Don't talk nonsense…
Renato knew, of course, but he abhorred sentimentality. It wasn't just Farías's life that was at stake.
-I signed, and let me tell you how it happened: standing in front of the window, looking at that tall, weather-resistant marble woman in the plaza. I stamped my signature without looking at the paper, as I had so many times before, but now my mind was on the horizon while my hand was busy stirring the mud.
Around seven-something I left and walked along Combate de los Pozos. The cold felt good because it was punishing. I lowered the collar of my overcoat and felt the growing coolness of the night. I had left the car near Congress, but I wanted to walk. I reached Rivadavia and continued along the odd-numbered side of the street, looking at the shop windows and the buses

picking up people heading home. I took Díaz Vélez and San Martín, all the way to Juan B. Justo. It was already around nine at night. I sat down at a bar table and ordered a steak sandwich and a glass of wine. Any old thing, as you can see, I didn't care about anything. I couldn't stop thinking about the afternoon of the funeral, about that orphaned little girl who wailed with the most atrocious inconsolability I'd ever seen. She wasn't crying for her parents, that was the point, something I didn't understand or didn't want to understand because it was unraveling the last orderly corners of my mind. I wept for those murdered men, who didn't yet exist, or who were being led to their deaths that very afternoon or later, who knows. That day I told myself Leticia was deranged, but wasn't I, making that journey through avenues and streets many months later? Because I should have admitted that that long walk was to naively defy something I couldn't fight. Since I had to sign, I wanted to at least allow myself the quixotic gesture of verifying the truth, and if it wasn't true, may God have mercy on my perjured soul and my deranged mind. But this last possibility was a dream built upon a dream that leaves nothing but pyrite dust; one day it shines, and the next it's nothing but compacted earth.

Accustomed, then, to disappointment, I resumed my walk along Juan B. Justo, deliberately slowing down, watching the buses with few passengers, the dogs tearing open garbage bags on street corners, the signs of closed businesses. Here a hardware store, there a furniture store, and every now and then a kiosk selling cigarettes and candy whose owner exhumed his boredom with yawns and a disheveled expression.

I arrived in Warnes, where I knew there was an entrance to the Maldonado tunnels. It was like a subway entrance that no one used except the water company employees, and even then, very rarely. I went down the stairs, covered in the excrement and urine of the homeless people who slept there. Today there were none. The gate was secured with a bolt wrapped several times with chain, but there was no padlock. The chain rattled among the street's facades, hidden by cars and trucks, as did the creaking of the rusty gate. Inside, the first thing I saw was the darkness that gradually dissolved into a gloom whose light slowly emerged as things appeared. But the first thing I noticed was the smell of the dirty water and the murmur of the slow,

steady current over the concrete channel. The columns on either side of the pipe seemed to form long rows covered in mold and growths of every color. There were very dim lamps on the ceiling here and there, but the main light came from the sewers. Everywhere I went I tripped over trash brought in by the rains, tires, and discarded telephone and electrical wires lying in concentric circles that I had to jump over to avoid falling. All I needed, I told myself, was Virgil to guide this homegrown Dante through the new circles of hell.

It was many blocks, perhaps as many as it takes to reach the place where the hearses stopped that afternoon. But he couldn't be sure, of course. Down there, everything is very different; time doesn't exist or passes so slowly as to be imperceptible, because what lends verisimilitude to its passage is space and its changes. Down there, however, everything was the same, or at least a constant repetition of the same scenery. A play, perhaps, where all the acts take place in the same location? If so, it wouldn't be strange if the characters and dialogue were also the same, with the slightest variations in words or gestures to ensure that the repetition isn't an impersonal automatism, but rather the deliberate and exasperating monotony of a tormented mind. The same exasperation that can lead to suicide.

But this word was sworn to by reality.

There was a dark mound that filled the entire space between the streambed, the wall, and the ceiling, obscuring the columns and threatening to block part of the flow. And that was the smell Leticia had spoken of; it couldn't have been anything else. Something so rotten and so obscene at the same time that it had affected both her body and her senses.

The nauseating combined with the acrid.

I have no way of defining it so that you can understand it, Renato, or even come close to understanding what that smell is .

-You brought him with you, Sebastiano.

"A portion, yes, but only an exquisite sample, like in a small vial with some Dior perfume. Anyway, it was a mountain covered with leather sheets that tried to conceal it, increasing the humidity that was both consuming and slowing the decomposition of all those corpses. I didn't count them, I couldn't, although I wanted to try, but they were all so rotten that the flesh and skin of

each one had become a putrid mass that mingled with that of the others. It was as if their bodies were joined in death in a way they could never have been in life. Curious, isn't it? Pathetic, isn't it?"

- You mean...? But what am I asking you!

" Go ahead and ask , but don't ask something you already know the answer to. There are plenty of people talking nonsense already, there in the government, and in the representative chambers, and in the courts. And on that monster of millions of languages called radio, and on that other one, surreptitious as a shadow that the marvelous box of images introduces into every human room, and which you turned off when you entered. The luminous shadow that hides the very thing it illuminates, because it's too clumsy, too stupid, a fat, immovable thing that doesn't budge from its corner, and that always waits for us to return to it, because we always return."

They were the dead from Leticia. The dead from Maldonado. So many that when the stream's current rose, it was inevitable that it would overflow and sweep some of them into the river. That's why the smell sometimes permeated Buenos Aires. Because I can't believe it wasn't just the sixty-one factory workers, but many others who left the capital that summer for the provinces to demonstrate and protest. Those who never returned and were never arrested.

- And do you think Leticia already knew?

"Of course, and much more than that. But how could a little girl like her, even with that gift, express the full immensity of the tragedy? She saw the future, but could only show, explain, a small part. The rest was made explicit by her body, clearly, with the vomiting and the illness. And even that, I imagine, wasn't enough. Do you think that when a system applies those methods it's only for a few, a handful, and that's it? What works once, works forever, and never ends. Numbers are infinite, aren't they, schoolteacher, professor, graduate of Carlos Pellegrini, recipient of the medal of honor from your graduating class?"

Why was he hurting his friend? I wondered. He wasn't really hurting his friend; he was simply resorting to his usual sarcasm, but this time it sounded like a knife of reproach. Renato understood it that way.

-Nobody asked you to...

That's right, no one but me and my stupidity, and my ego, too. Playing both sides is the closest thing to feeling truly powerful. Those who hold power are arbitrary, doubt gnaws at them, and arbitrariness destroys them. We, on the other hand, are referees. How many times have you cursed at a soccer referee? Yes, I know you don't like it, that you think it's stupid for eleven guys to chase a ball for almost two hours and kill each other over it. But think about it for a moment, what are political parties then? A bunch of players chasing the ball to keep it for themselves.

She fell silent, at least that's what I heard from the dark hallway, sitting on the floor, hugging my knees and hiding my face between them, but with my ears open.

"And what did you do?" Renato asked.

"And what did you want me to do? I didn't start crying or screaming like in a horror movie. I just approached, covering my nose with one arm, and with the other, I peeled back the hides a little. I saw skulls, hands, legs, sticking out like beggars asking for alms. Then someone spoke to me: 'What are you doing here?' I turned around, and it was the Martins ' gardener , and the hearse driver, remember ? Oscar Méndez, his name is. I remember that exchange of glances between Leticia and him in the street. A bad guy, a beast for anyone who wanted to use him, one of the most bizarre sons of bitches I've ever seen. He's one of those you could say has no soul, because a heart... what! ... just an organ that circulates the obscene blood they carry inside. 'What are you doing here, Méndez?' I retorted. He shrugged." “Working, doctor, what do you think?, as a night watchman in Maldonado, going back and forth through the middle of the shit, but every now and then you find a gem, like you doctor, with that fancy outfit, although now, to tell the truth, it has gotten a little dirty.”

I wasn't going to answer him. I looked toward the gate and the exit stairs, far, far away now. I started walking, but he stopped me. "I can't let you go, doctor." I pulled away from the hands that were holding me. He grabbed me again. "Don't be an idiot, doctor, you know better than anyone..." " Let me go ," I said, but he tripped me and threw me to the ground, face down on the shit-covered floor. I waited a moment to recover from the shock, and I was confident he wasn't expecting any further resistance from me. So I turned

around when he loosened his grip and knocked him out . I ran in the only direction I could go, toward the mountain of the dead. My God, I thought, when I realized I couldn't go any further unless I jumped into the water. I recovered, once again, the stupidity of common sense that doesn't get along well with reality. I'm not going to escape that guy, that animal, I told myself. I didn't have time to fight back; he'd already pushed me to the ground and was rubbing my face against the bones of the corpses. I felt Méndez's full weight on top of me. He was going to kill me, I was sure of it. He'd caught me so off guard again that I didn't have the strength to move. His legs were on top of mine, his hands pinning my arms to the ground. He was strong, I knew that. More muscular than me, more trained in all kinds of work. His arms were like pillars, and my body was trapped. But I didn't imagine, I swear to God and to whatever you hold dear, I swear to you, Renato, on Ceci's life…
Her voice suddenly faltered, just as she said my name. I heard her ragged breathing as she tried to resume her story, but it was like when you get a lump in your throat and it's hard to continue.
-I didn't imagine what was going to happen, what he did…
"But Sebastiano, please, calm down ." Renato was talking nonsense, and he knew it, but what can you say when you don't know what to say, especially when the option of silence borders, unintentionally, on indifference?
-He subdued me, Renato.
Sebastiano Farías wept with quiet sobs, his hands covering his face. His shoulders moved, agitated, and his back was like earth shaken by a catastrophe.
I peeked out a little. Farías was hugging Renato, who was rocking him like a child, stroking his head, patting his back.
They didn't speak again that night. I waited for one of them to move so I could go to bed, but they stayed on the couch, just as they were, until dawn. But before that, in the silence, I saw Mom's shadow in the bathroom doorway. She knew I'd heard everything, just like she had. She couldn't scold me, of course. We were accomplices.

Much later, I pieced together what happened afterward. Méndez left him there, because he had no plan other than what his own brutality dictated. He

disappeared, perhaps living in those tunnels where no one bothered to look, especially when, shortly afterward, the subway network began to expand, which in one way or another had connections through the tunnel beneath Juan B. Justo Avenue. He could have been hiding like a vagrant, or he could have been working like any other laborer on the construction of the new tunnels.

Sebastiano got up several hours later, probably. He walked, leaning against the walls, to the exit gate. It was already daylight; there were many people in the street who could have helped him, but he was ashamed of his appearance. Dirty, wounded, and humiliated. He stayed where he was all day, without eating or drinking anything. The traffic died down as night fell. Then he left and walked toward our house and rang the doorbell. He was just a body, nothing more, when Mom saw him at the door, leaning against the frame. Slowly, over the days, he regained a certain dignity. That's what he called it when he said goodbye to us on Sunday, well-dressed in the suit Renato had gone to get from the apartment in Palermo, and his scent was no longer so strong with the cologne he usually wore. Even so, he couldn't help but make a slight gesture, quickly stopped by his well-learned civility, of sniffing the air around him. He gave me an affectionate kiss on the cheek, hugged my mother, or rather, she hugged him so tightly that she didn't seem to want to let go. Then, with the door open, he hugged Renato for a long time. They whispered something to each other, slapping each other with sounds of anger and love. Renato's glasses twisted, and he took them off. As he cleaned them, he could no longer see his friend clearly as he walked down Barracas Street for the last time.

The new decade had begun, or rather, we were on its doorstep. New revolutions were on the horizon, poverty and economic collapse—the same old story. What was new for us was hearing the news about Dr. Farías. In August, he had resigned his seat in Congress; it was said he was retiring to dedicate himself to his law practice. He defended a couple of men accused of private murders, a case he lost very easily, so easily it was as if he had collaborated with the prosecutor. After that, he also resigned from his law practice. He had plenty of money, of course. The house in Palermo wasn't actually large, but it

was enough for a single man. With its narrow, stately facade, surrounded by trees, it was like a cramped country house where an aging duchess could have lived comfortably. He hardly ever went out, only dining on Saturday nights with a few friends from Congress at the Barolo Palace restaurant on Avenida de Mayo. Then he walked home; he no longer used a car, he wasn't afraid of being mugged. Anyone who saw him saw a man prematurely stooped, smoking cigarette after cigarette along the streets, walking up and down curbs, some intact, some broken, pausing now and then in front of a bar to look at the little men he had spoken so much about in his speeches. Had it been worth it? Without answering himself, he kept walking.

One day, in late December, between Christmas Eve and New Year's Day, she left her house. It was a Tuesday, probably the last workday before the holiday. She carried her cat, her only companion in the house, in a basket. The cat was old, and she took him to the veterinarian who had known him for many years. She paid the bill and left, without seeing him put to sleep.

He waited a while for the bus and had to ask a woman at the end of the line if it was the one that would take him to the Hotel Castelar. The woman stared at him, as if offended. She must have misunderstood. He apologized. Inconsistencies like these are common among people who suddenly change their habits and customs, and being out of place becomes the norm.

He arrived mid-afternoon. The sauna at the Hotel Castelar on Avenida de Mayo, where he went every Tuesday, where he talked and closed deals, where arguments broke out and alliances were renewed, was just opening. It was also the day Colonel Ansaldi went.

In the changing room, he undressed and placed a towel around his waist and another around his left arm. He entered the dry sauna. It was empty, still; it was early. Politicians and businessmen went after six or seven in the evening. But Colonel Ansaldi arrived earlier; he had crossed paths with him before, many of those encounters having contributed to that year's agreement. The colonel didn't like being surrounded by large crowds; he had his offices in the Libertador Building for that purpose.

Farías waited an hour, perhaps. Then he saw him enter. They greeted each other with a nod. The colonel, not very tall but muscular and hairy, had a mustache that sweated more than the rest of his body. It was funny to see him

dripping with sweat like rain falling from an overhang. But they couldn't laugh at him. The colonel remained serious as he repeatedly wiped the sweat from his brow.

They looked at each other in silence, each knowing what had happened in those months. Sebastiano stood up and faced him. Ansaldi looked at him first with curiosity, then with mockery, and said:

- Are you looking for me, doctor?

Then Farías dropped the towel covering his left hand and fired a shot point-blank into his chest. It was almost silent, but he couldn't risk anyone entering. He put the revolver barrel in his mouth and fired.

CONSECRATION OF THE FLESH

1

The phone rang repeatedly around three in the morning. I didn't answer; I was too exhausted, feverish, and in pain to get out of bed and go to the small table in the hallway by the bedroom door. Since Bernardo had left, I'd taken the phone out of the room, tired of the calls he received from the hospital at all hours.

The second time was, perhaps, half an hour later. It began to chime again like a stubborn animal, over and over, but I, in my half-sleep, let the obsessive bell, driven by pure malice, transform, by virtue of the nightmares in the intermediate plane of my sleep, into the groans of dinosaurs or into songs that came from the abyss. What abyss? The only one we know, or rather, the only one we don't know, the one that gathers all our fears and seizes our will.

The ringing stopped, and the horrors vanished. Until my infected leg gripped me again, its claws of pain grabbing my flesh, and jolted me back to the reality of the apartment room on Sarmiento Street, near the Abasto market, in a sweltering January in Buenos Aires. And the pain was sharp, like the teeth of the dogs the Furies had sent me again after so long. The bites were the ringing of the telephone, once more, insistent and unyielding. How to silence it? By taking it off the hook, of course. But then would come the ringing of the doorbell, and then the voices of the men who were worried about me. That worry that soon turns into a weariness that metamorphoses into contempt and then into hatred. The paths of love, of course, because it isn't always a comfortable asphalt highway. The potholes are cancers that gnaw at the surface, and soon the road becomes a shattered track, the kind you'd expect from a cataclysm.

It was six in the morning on the alarm clock on the nightstand. The telephone, as clear as the morning, was calling me. I got up, limping.

"Hello," I said, not recognizing my own voice.

It was Renato. His voice, always confident and calm, trembled, clinging to a doubt like a useless life preserver.

-I think your mom is dead…

He told me she must have gotten up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. Senile as she was from Alzheimer's, she walked tentatively around the house in Mataderos. He was tired too, and had to sleep at some point, even though he tried to watch over her all the time, which is why he lamented

and reproached himself for having neglected her when some household accident occurred. The teachers' pension they both received was, of course, insufficient to hire a nurse, and putting her in a nursing home was an option many had suggested, but one he never dared to accept. His mother's lucid periods, though increasingly brief and infrequent, dissuaded him from making that decision.

I didn't intervene. I knew enough to realize that it might be an essential decision, but I refrained not only from influencing her, but I also gradually distanced myself from Mom, because I felt increasingly unable to bear the scenes of bad television drama that my visits became. Her tearful caress, her anguished face in which I recognized the lucid, tremendous intelligence of my mother trapped in a body that was now her most implacable enemy. Then, the weeping, and finally the curses she hurled at me when, on the path of her illness, she no longer recognized me, seeing me as an enemy. I was not her daughter, then, but death incarnate.

That morning, I looked down at my injured leg, and it was like seeing myself the way my mother saw me back then. Death was a vine growing from the floor, whether it was dirt, cement, or the tiles of a third-floor apartment. Listening to Renato's explanation of what had happened that night, I apologized for not answering the previous calls.

I burst into tears and hung up, saying I would come as soon as I could.

I thought of Mom, lying on the bathroom floor, Renato already kneeling beside her, stroking her head. I had to call Bernardo and bother him at work. For him, it's his duty to help me, all because of that guilt that has always haunted him, and that's why his feelings are mixed, contradictory, ambivalent. Love can also transform into that, malleable and symbiotic like no other feeling. Love has no form; it's a monster that metamorphoses according to the occasion.

I showered as best I could, injected my insulin, treated the sores on my leg, and covered them with bandages. I took my medication and injected a very small dose of cocaine. The marijuana was in a small jar and the cocaine in a packet in my nightstand drawer. I didn't have to hide them anymore, but pretending a little felt good, like keeping up appearances in the face of my own wickedness.

Bernardo arrived with his smock under his arm.
- Forgive me if you were going to work...
He looked at me the way he always did when I played the victim. He placed the back of his hand on my forehead and then kissed me.
-You need to be hospitalized...
-Mom died...
-You already told me... let me go to Renato's and I'll take care of everything...
- You think so!
It wasn't a question. She lowered her gaze and rubbed her eyes.
-I know I'm tiring you out...
"Let's not argue, Ceci. If you want to go, let's go. We'll see later..."

We arrived at the house in Mataderos. Since I could do nothing more than watch from the precarious position my crutches gave me, I saw the two of them lift Mom's body from the bathroom floor and carry it to the bedroom to place it on the bed. Her forehead was injured; she must have been sitting on the toilet and then fallen face-first onto the floor. Renato hadn't heard anything; he'd been partially deaf for a few months, and that made him feel guilty for not being more attentive to Mom's needs. Bernardo hugged him and told him not to worry, that this was bound to happen at any moment, for any reason. I felt proud of the intimate complicity between them.
Bernardo called the funeral home, the insurance company, and the social services agency. He sat down by the telephone on the dining room table, where Perón had once sat before I was born. Renato was beside him, rummaging through the many papers Mom kept in a drawer of the bedroom dresser. Loose, folded, torn, or wrapped in paper or cellophane envelopes. ID cards , photos, credentials. Old, neglected things. I, sitting on the bed next to the body, watched Renato's hands tremble, because he was old now. He refrained from crying, but I glimpsed his sad, desperate eyes when Bernardo, speaking with some official on the other end of the line, asked him something, and he, frustrated at not fully understanding, would become angry, and his freckled hands would tremble even more. Then Bernardo would grab one of his hands while with the other he continued pressing the tube against his ear, attentive to the slow evolution of the bureaucracy of the state undertakers.

"Call the old ladies," I said. "They simplify the whole process. After all, Mom was a Gonçalvez."

During that long morning, I heard my mother's full name several times: Rosa Mística Gonçalvez. She hated her name, Rosa for its simplicity and sentimentality, Mística for the shameful religious superstition to which her own mother had condemned her. She always told me that her parents were as contradictory as she and my father, Benjamín Tejada, had been. My grandmother was a devout Catholic who adored almost everyone in the Catholic pantheon, but she had a special fondness for Saint Rose of Lima. Somehow, she told me, she preferred that saint who had shown particular courage in her self-flagellation. She wasn't like others, Mama would say, those hypocritical hypocrites who pretended to be saints with some dubious, cheap miracle, or with some even more dubious apparition in the mist of a country morning or amidst the smoke and smog of a little city chapel. In any case, she abhorred that tradition, which her grandmother had abandoned to entice her, ever since she discovered her reading Marx and the socialists as a teenager, and even more so when she joined leftist groups. Her grandmother died of cancer when she was thirty-five, and her mother fifteen. From then on, the influence of her grandfather, Gustavo Gonçalvez, was unavoidable, leading her to visit her paternal relatives throughout Buenos Aires and the provinces, almost reaching Brazil. On one of those visits, in La Plata, she met a pharmacist named Valverde who had married her grandfather's niece. But she never saw this cousin, whom she called Rosa, like her mother, because she was confined to her sickroom. She had an infected hand for some time; so, that memory became intertwined with my own reality.

I touched my dying leg and thought of the roses, which, despite what their name implied, also withered, taking on the scent of all that decays. The saint of Lima knew this very well; that much was clear to me, as lucid as I was despite the pain in my soul and my leg. Perhaps it was the effect of the drugs, which sometimes plunged me into a kind of ecstasy of supreme awareness, where everything I saw and heard was a sharp pain I couldn't avoid, unable to grasp the full extent of its meanings and implications. Past and future were one in a long, synthetic detail of everything: color, dimensions, words, gestures, sounds. Everything resonated in my body and spirit; I saw

everything clearly, and there was no reason to doubt or to weep. The inevitable is not something to be wept over.

They listened to me and nodded. While Bernardo called the funeral home, I thought about Mom in her final days. The reason she had given for spacing out my visits was my own illness, but the truth was that I couldn't bear to leave that house, where I had spent my childhood, feeling like a stranger, because that's what my visits made me feel. I already knew about her senile dementia and what to expect, of course, but in my ignorance, I hoped that even if she didn't recognize me when I arrived, with the conversation and intimacy at the end of each afternoon, she would eventually recognize me at least a little, and that little bit would allow me to recover my sense of belonging, or rather, my identity. When I arrived, I would find her in her rocking chair or her bed, her gaze lost at the window or the ceiling, and when she saw me enter the bedroom, she would extend her hands to me. Whether it was recognition or not, that welcome comforted me, especially when she immediately followed it up by calling me "daughter" almost sheepishly, because I could see she was making futile efforts to remember my name. However, that detail didn't matter. Whether my name was Cecilia or Violet of the Alps or whatever, I was her daughter. But as the afternoon wore on, the conversation became irrelevant, and the gaps between words grew longer and longer, irritating her. Suddenly, she would glare at me and ask who I was and why I had come. There was no way to bring her back to her former state. Since my explanations and excuses, sometimes invented as a way to fit into the fantasy she was constructing, didn't satisfy her, she would become enraged and so agitated that I would choose to leave like an intruder.

Other days, however, she would ramble on with mystical notions that were always so far removed from her usual personality that they provoked more pity in me than the fury with which she treated me. It was then that I often remembered the name Rosa Mística, the name she had been given at her baptism. On those occasions, Mama would look out the window, clutching the beads of a rosary that Renato had to search high and low among the drawers and old clothes that had belonged to Grandma. Mama didn't know how to pray, but since the illness had struck her, she recited her prayers without interruption and without error. Whether she invented them or not didn't

matter; her logic constructed grammatically correct sentences, full of a mystical content she could never have read in her politics and history books. The times I spoke with Renato about it, he told me that perhaps as a girl she had read about religion and catechism to please her mother, and those things remained dormant somewhere in her memory, a room closed off by the personality that dominates the entire psyche, and when that personality becomes ill, the hidden, locked-up creatures can come out. I asked Renato how he could be so sure of that, and then Dr. Cisneros, Bernardo's neurologist friend who had been treating her for almost a year, came in.
We were in Mom's room. She sat on the bed, looking at each of us with the same suspicion she displayed when assessing the men's intentions at committee meetings, but in her hands, the rosary moved smoothly, like a well-oiled machine. Each bead was a prayer for each of us: me, the meddlesome woman who came around now and then to bother her; her husband, whom she annoyed precisely because she remembered him and couldn't forget him no matter how hard she tried; and the doctor who touched and examined her with questions and instruments that kept her occupied. Alberto Cisneros was the only one welcome in that house. Mom didn't call him by name or say "doctor," but she smiled when he listened to her heart or took her pulse, or when he brought his face close to hers to give her a kiss.
"I'm glad you're the only one she wants, doctor. She needs you," I heard Renato repeat several times.
"He needs all of us," Cisneros replied.
"No, doctor, we need her... But it's better this way; at least it gives the impression that she's not suffering. Without memory, there is no suffering..."
"Do you think so? Alzheimer's is like a great battle; memories are constantly fighting. Rosa suffers inside, even though we can't see it."
- And what about those mystical beliefs, doctor? - I asked one afternoon at the end of December, specifically the 24th, which we never celebrated and which Mom wanted to remember for the first time by insisting on a dinner that never actually happened.
"I already told you, the inhabitants of the closed-off rooms of the mind. Look at it this way, Cecilia. Neurotransmitters are the traffic that travels along our neurons. They carry positive or negative messages; they're like companies

that mostly compete. The one that arrives first gets the business, and the competition is blocked. When disease appears, the economy goes haywire. Inflation and the deficit gnaw at the mind, highway blockades erupt, businesses close, and revolution is soon on the horizon."

"Chaos, you mean, Doctor." And she loved those situations so much. She was a rebel par excellence, a nonconformist who sometimes had to keep her mouth shut to be left alone.

"Why do you talk about her as if she were dead?" I asked Renato that afternoon last month.

Mother began to pray a prayer none of us knew. She stood up and started pacing the room, still clutching her rosary, but then we noticed her face had transfigured, taking on an expression we'd never seen before, so strange and beatific that we felt a pang of fear. Suddenly, she came up to me and knelt at my feet. I was sitting with my crutches propped against the back of the chair. I tried to stop her from bending down, driven by the foolish prejudice of seeing an old woman exert herself in a way that would harm her health, but she clapped my hands in a gentle rebuke and stroked my ailing leg. Then she began to untie the bandages. Cisneros tried to lift her, but not only did she refuse, but I told him to let her do it. When the ulcers were exposed, Mother touched them with her hands, and I felt the rosary beads brushing against the sores, which were now barely hurting. She kissed them, and her lips were tinged with a little blood.

Renato was crying, leaning on the dresser with one elbow and cleaning his glasses with his handkerchief. Cisneros stood behind her, confused. Mama, however, had a beatific look in her eyes as she observed me, a glimpse of final recognition. Was she reconciling her lifelong beliefs with her mother's most ancient convictions? Was the pain of the flesh with which the saint flagellated herself as a sacrifice to an uncertain God perhaps also the pain of poverty and hunger suffered by men and women displaced and imprisoned by social injustices? Did she realize now that all deaths and all bodies with their suffering bones and muscles were the same as the flesh and blood of the saints and the much-praised Christ?

Finally, Mama collapsed to the floor and began to scream with rage. It was her mind that was battling within itself; she couldn't reconcile the two. She

was rebelling against the beatitude, because beatitude wasn't for her. The Mystic Rose who ran through the streets around Congress and Plaza de Mayo, the one who had shouted speeches, the one who had forced open the doors of government offices—was she the same Rose whose rifle barrels were covered in thorns, the ones they had pointed at her so many times over so many years?

Behind his face was an endless war.

That night of December 24th, I stayed with them. Mom was asleep with her eyes open. Renato was sitting on the sofa, listening to a record. It was a Mozart Mass, perhaps K 427, I don't remember, but the Credo was playing at that moment. From Mom's room, I could hear the groans of voices trying to believe in what they didn't believe. And the text, although in Latin, parodied what she had chanted that afternoon.

The consecration of the flesh and everlasting life.

I endured it as long as I could, which was as long as the slow funeral arrangements organized by the employees of Gamaliel, the company I believe I've mentioned in one of my papers, lasted. The ceremonies were tedious, more than tearful, resurrected from oblivion and emphasized by the intention of highlighting the difference with the modernity they stood in stark contrast to. Slow caravans that seemed endless, roads that felt long, even though they weren't. The wake lasted twenty-four hours, which became torture for my weary body. Renato and I supported each other, willing to endure all the trappings of a dusty, middle-class aristocracy just to avoid the cumbersome state procedures. Many relatives I didn't know came to the house, all or almost all of them from my mother's family. None of the Tejadas were there, and a few of Renato's Taboadas, whom I didn't know, left as soon as they offered their condolences, murmuring amongst themselves as they watched the Gonçalvez oddballs. That's what we were, and I was one of them. A haggard, thin, sickly blonde, who had been in the news for a while because of the protests and the newspaper's closure. An oddball who walked on crutches and would soon languish in one leg. A bird that would hop across the cobblestones of Buenos Aires on one leg, whose mere appearance was a bad omen. Was I judging myself too harshly? Was this psychological self-

flagellation nothing more than theater, or a genuine victimhood that also had no reason to exist?

I was falling into depression, obviously.

The funeral was held at Chacarita Cemetery. Afterward, we returned to Mataderos. Bernardo forced me, under threat of abandoning me forever, to check myself into the Rivadavia Hospital the following day. I saw something in his eyes I had never seen before, and it was no longer love, so I understood that the threat would be carried out. What would I have left without him? To abandon myself to the bed in the apartment on Sarmiento Street, waiting for time, which would slowly bring the furnishings of my death.

That's how I ended up being taken from my parents' house to the hospital. They ran the usual tests: blood work, X-rays, electrocardiograms. I was wheeled through the antiquated corridors from the laboratory, with its spacious rooms and long rows of chairs, to the hard X-ray tables, surrounded by contraptions that moved above my body like ancient metallic dinosaurs, or dragons breathing invisible fire, beams that penetrated me, exploring, without revealing, the very essence of my being. Then came the cardiac wards, and I even thought I could hear the altered rhythm of the tachycardias, the arrhythmias, the old arteries dilating and contracting to the rhythm of dissonant music. Lying on the table with electrodes strapped to my wrists and ankles, attached to my chest with those execrable, leech-like suction cups, I stared at the half-dead on the other tables on either side.

When they took me to the room, some friends were waiting for me. They continued to come until just before the day of the surgery. Braulio, for example, always faithful; a few others from the newspaper; Dr. Ibáñez, who kept stopping by because he was Bernardo's friend; and above all, Soledad's eternal lover, the nurse who was more than just a professional to me. I found myself surrounded by men, and I realized I had no female friends. I didn't empathize with my own sex, it's true, nor did they seem interested in offering me what they sensed I was asking for. We women don't pity each other, and pity is nothing but hypocrisy.

The operation was postponed several times: once because my blood sugar was out of whack, another time because of an anesthesiologist strike, and yet another time because I was so depressed that I unconsciously asked for a

dose of cocaine. Leonardo González was there, and so was Bernardo. They both watched me from opposite sides of the bed. Bernardo knew about my habit, which I don't know if it was an addiction or simply a need. I'm talking nonsense now; it's the same thing. Frequency doesn't make an addiction, the reason does. He had already seen the needle marks on my arms, but he had the good sense not to mention them until that day.

Leonardo whispered in my ear:

-Relax, Ceci.

Bernardo approached him and said something I didn't hear. Leonardo nodded, and they both left the room. Soledad came in and put something in the IV drip that calmed me down.

"Are they fighting?" I asked him.

She laughed.

-No, Ceci. Don't make yourself bad blood.

The surgery was suspended the next day, but on Monday, February 14th, I was taken to the operating room.

For two days I slept, save for brief awakenings filled with daydreams and figures that passed before my eyes, leaving me unsure whether they were real or imagined. When I awoke more lucidly, it was around six or seven in the evening. The maid had just left, placing the tray with dinner on the small table. I saw Bernardo and Renato, who looked old and haggard. There were flowers in two or three vases of water. I felt no pain and asked if the surgery had been postponed again.

"No, Ceci," Soledad told me, appearing through the door at just the right moment to save the men present.

-But if…

It was exactly that, the phantom limb I'd been warned about so many times. Painless, my leg wandered around the room like in a cartoon: the bones smiling and the flesh dancing to the tune of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Pull back the sheet to see the asymmetry of my body? What for? I started crying like an idiot, lamenting once again the inevitable, without having learned a lesson I'd heard a thousand times. But if the brain is stubborn, what can you expect from that monster that grows in our chest and keeps

repeating the same thing like a broken record? Until someone pulls back the needle and brings back the silence.

2

Three weeks later, more or less, I was discharged. It was early March, and I could hear the noise of the kids passing by on the sidewalk at midday or in the afternoon. Bernardo came in with the hospital discharge papers and a smile that didn't fool anyone.
"Okay, Ceci," he told me, "I'll take you to Renato's house, he has everything ready."
- So that?
-To live with him.
-I have my apartment on Sarmiento, unless you took it from me.
I was harsh, it's true, but I couldn't be any less when they had arranged my future without telling me anything.
-But you ca n't live alone…
- And why not? I manage just fine with the crutches, and one less piece of leg doesn't change much…
-But the stability isn't the same, you know , the stairs…
-That's what elevators are for…
-But…
-Nothing Bernie… I know that if I fall you feel responsible, but bones heal.
-But…
-Again… did you choke on that word? What you're really worried about is my emotional stability. I promise you that if I kill myself, I'll leave a note releasing you from all responsibility.
I sat there on the bed, one leg dangling at the side, the other practically invisible because I could still feel it. As always, the doctor remained silent and retreated into his shell.

At the door of the room, however, there were other newly arrived people who had heard and sensed the anguish that hung in the air like a nauseating smell. They came in, and Dora Cifuentes hugged me tightly, her face troubled, but without tears. Beside her stood a man of average height, stocky, with broad shoulders and a dark, unshaven beard. His plaid shirt was like a lumberjack's, and his jeans were stained with what looked like grease from some workshop. When Dora let go of me, she introduced me to her husband.

-This is Pedro, my husband, I already told you about him in the newsroom.

The man shook my hand, his skin thick and stained with indelible marks, probably also from grease.

-Excuse me, miss, I just came out of the workshop to bring Dora.

"It doesn't matter, Pedro," I said.

- And how is he doing?

Dora nudged him in the ribs with her elbow and said:

- Excuse him , Ceci, he's a scatterbrain…

Pedro didn't know how to apologize, rubbing his hands together and looking at Bernardo with embarrassment. The doctor and his white coat intimidated him. Later he would learn that it wasn't fear, but a reverential respect for doctors.

“Thank you for coming,” I said to Dora, smiling at her, and for the first time in all that time I felt free to do and say what I wanted, not what Bernardo and Renato and everyone else expected of me. We held hands for a few seconds that meant more than those three weeks of care. I hadn't seen Dora in a long time, and because her face was one I hadn't thought about for so long, it was a kind of oasis of novelty. She knew me, of course, but the distance had softened the resentment that had been growing like weeds around me. Those around me were suffocating me like a high, dense wall of thistle-covered grasslands.

- And what's new with you, Dora? What are you doing?

She shrugged.

"Now I'm just a housewife, nothing more, I take care of the kids. I'm the woman I dedicated the supplement to, remember ? But I'll tell you about that later. Were you discharged?"

Looking at Bernardo, he asked permission to accompany me.

"Look, doctor. I understand you, but don't worry, Pedro and I will take care of Cecilia."
I started to refuse. Dora covered my mouth with one hand and said:
-I'm not going to listen to you. I have the whole afternoon free after I take the kids to school.
I saw Bernardo's expression change to one of relief, which had the effect of relaxing his entire body. His smock suddenly seemed too big for him, and he placed a hand on Pedro's shoulder. With that simple gesture, he expressed his gratitude and asked:
-If I can help them in any way.
"Don't worry about any of that, doctor. I earn a good living at the refrigerator company. I fix everything, doctor—old motors, doors, the whole refrigeration system. If you could see me..."
While I was talking to Bernardo, he had turned his head and I noticed a scar on his side above his ear, which covered the entire temporal bone and part of the parietal bone. He didn't have much hair; he must have been almost forty, but his hair, though sparse, grew and suddenly stopped at that long line of white skin.
They wheeled me to the parking lot that led out onto Las Heras. It was an old, well-maintained Dodge pickup truck. Bernardo and Pedro helped me get in, chatting amongst themselves about the vehicle. As we said goodbye, I gave him a kiss like we used to when we were a couple.
-Thanks, Bernie. Forgive my bad mood… Tell Dad to forgive me, I'll call him tonight.
She started to tear up and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her lab coat. Dora and Pedro, in the front seats, pretended not to notice anything. We started the car and I turned around, saying goodbye to the hospital, and without really knowing it for sure, for the last time. The traffic excused our silence. Pedro turned on the radio where Antonio Carrizo was holding forth on the national situation. Culture, he said, was going to survive.
"Do you think so?" Dora asked me. My gaze was fixed on her husband's scar. It must have been a very major, very serious operation. He was, or seemed to me, rather slow to react, clumsy in the sense of what he did automatically, but slow to react to new things. He drove cautiously and carefully through the

heavy midday traffic, perhaps too cautiously for what one generally expects from a man like him: burly, middle-aged, and hardened by the experience of the streets.

Then I remembered that Dora had told me she worked in the newspaper's printing plant and was illiterate. That stark intellectual contrast pleasantly surprised me.

"They helped me up the stairs because there was no light from early on," the doorman told us.

"Thank goodness the doctor didn't come," Dora said, laughing conspiratorially with me. Pedro was doing almost all the lifting to help me up, because I was still haunted by the memory of my leg.

Inside, they sat me down in the armchair, and Dora began her duties by preparing lunch for the three of us. Pedro said, looking at the wristwatch on his hairy right forearm—was he left-handed? But I had seen him do things predominantly with his right hand—

"I have to go, Dora, it's almost 2 o'clock, and I'm running late..."

Dora gave a start, tired of the situation.

-Whatever you want. Come pick up the kids. Today, since it's the first day, I'm staying until tonight.

Refusing to listen to my protest, she kissed him and affectionately pushed him to the door.

"See you tomorrow, miss," he shouted at me.

-You have to address me informally, Pedro.

She nodded and left. Dora closed the door and sat back down with me on the sofa. She put her hands between her legs and began to rock back and forth like a little girl, silently looking around.

Suddenly, he clapped his hands, as if giving himself a boost, and said he was going to the kitchen.

-If you need help with the bathroom, don't be stupid and let me know.

Before she got up, I held her arm and asked her:

- What happened to your husband?

Looking at me mockingly, he replied:

-Your journalistic curiosity seems to ooze from every pore…

-You don't understand , it's just the appreciation I have for you all…

"I'm not wrong, Ceci," he said, sitting back down. "Journalists at heart, or writers—because you write very well—hit the mark when something catches their attention."
-I saw the scar, and it seemed to me that he'd had serious surgery. Maybe a wound, I don't know. But if you don't want to tell me, that's fine.
Dora laughed.
-No problem, Ceci. I'll tell you from the kitchen. You must be hungry, and I'm even more so.
I heard her opening and closing the cupboard doors, then the sound of pots and pans.
-Pedro was a policeman, you didn't know that, did you? Does it surprise you? Of course it does, you see him as kind of a moron and you wonder how a guy like that could have a permit to carry a gun.
Dora asked herself questions and answered them in that long monologue that lasted while she prepared the potato omelet for lunch, both of them sitting at the dining room table in the mid-afternoon, a time that was dangerously close to teatime. But schedules were all over the place, and the obligations, so heavy, had collapsed under their own weight.
"If you had seen him back then, when I met him. Quite the heartthrob in his uniform, showing off with his police baton on the sidewalk in the neighborhood. He was never the sharpest tool in the shed, of course, but he was a good cop, responsible and caring, and that's why I was afraid they'd kill him. But that's not how it all happened, Ceci." Obviously, Dora had read my mind. "We were already married and had our first child when the revolution broke out. Pedro was working in the capital, right downtown, on Avenida de Mayo, in the poshest area where the congressmen and all the other political hacks and opportunists hung out. The military went to the Hotel Castelar and the restaurants around Galerías Pacífico and the Palacio Barolo. Lots of people around, but not very dangerous because the 'blacks' didn't usually go there, as they say. But one day he was walking past the hotel and they yelled at him from the revolving door." "Come on, come on!" the concierge, the bellboy, and a few other guys shouted at him. My Pedro went in, and they didn't give him time to ask anything. They pulled him through the lobby and then down the stairs to the sauna changing rooms. "They killed the colonel!"

one of them said, opening the door to the Turkish bath. A cloud of steam blinded Pedro, but he soon saw two men lying on the ground. One was on the steps, the other on the floor. The one on the floor had a pistol in his hand. He had just shot himself after shooting the other man. "It's Colonel Ansaldi!" the concierge whimpered, sweating more from despair than from the heat. Pedro told me that he went up to the colonel's naked body and realized he was breathing despite the point-blank wound that covered almost his entire chest. My Pedro was quick-witted back then; he knew there was no point in asking if they had called an ambulance, and that it wouldn't do any good anyway. If he didn't get into a hospital and an operating room within half an hour at most, the guy was sure to die.

The aroma of the tortilla wafted from the kitchen, delicious. I got up, trying not to make a sound and avoid Dora's complaints. I had to practice with my crutches, get used to my new body—the same old body sporting a new design, lighter, but unfortunately asymmetrical. I started setting the table, listening as I went.

" Do you know what he did?" There was admiration in Dora's voice and tone. Even without seeing her, I imagined her standing in front of the kitchen, watching over the tortilla, hands on her hips, reveling in the memory. "He picked up the colonel, went upstairs, and crossed the lobby to the street, covering the man with a sheet, and ran into the revolving door. He cursed at everyone who could hear him, until they opened the front door and he went out onto the sidewalk and ran the twenty meters to the parked patrol car. He turned on the siren and went straight to the Rivadavia Hospital."

I sat down in a chair and leaned my crutches against the back. I started folding napkins, and I understood the reason for Pedro's gaze at Bernardo and the doctors, but that was only the beginning of such admiration.

"It's ready," I heard Dora say, and I saw her appear with the impeccable Spanish omelet, placing it on the table and looking at me as if to scold me for having put in so much effort after just leaving the hospital.

"I feel fine, Dora. And if I don't keep myself busy, I know I'm going to end up badly."

We started eating.

- And what happened?

"With the military man? He was saved, of course, thanks to Pedro. It took him several months to recover and a lifetime pension that only increased his political influence. You must have heard of him."

I then told her about Sebastiano. She looked at me as if the planets had aligned or the constellations had formed the exact pattern for a momentous event: the day her story and mine coincided.

"Who would have believed it?" she said, shaking her head in disbelief and chewing the tortilla with relish. "But do you think Pedro got a medal or something? He was barely promoted one rank, but it was enough to get him a permanent position on the colonel's security detail. A year later, our second son was born. Pedro worked every day because that military man went everywhere: Congress, the Government House, the Central Bank, television studios, restaurants, and high-class brothels, of course. My Pedro would wait at the door." Dora looked at me and laughed. "Of course, I always trusted him; that's the advantage of having a handsome, but somewhat slow, husband." "Anyway, the thing is, there was another uprising, or several, I don't know, I didn't follow politics that closely until I started working at the newspaper. It was in Plaza de Mayo. Ansaldi was listed as the main speaker to support the overthrow of Cámpora and Isabel, I do remember that much." I loved Perón, but not that whore who thought she was a new Evita. The thing is, there were shots fired, no more than we were used to back then, and we don't know if it was a stray bullet or a shot meant for the colonel. But my Pedro, stubborn as he is, put his head right in the path of the bullet. Without premeditation, of course, just as there was none that afternoon while he was on his routine guard duty in front of the Hotel. The bullet pierced his skull and killed almost a fifth of his brain. The parietal lobe, the surgeons said, and part of the temporal lobe. They showed me the X-rays, and although I didn't understand anything, I imagined I saw a kind of volcano with a newly opened crater. That's what I saw when they explained that the petrous bone, the mastoid process, more precisely, had burst, releasing the pus from the infection, which was the main reason for the months he spent hospitalized in the Military Hospital.

Dora had stopped eating, and was talking with her gaze lost on the wall in front of the table, her elbows resting on the tablecloth and her hair, which

was once reddish and was now graying, moving slightly due to the effect of the fan she had turned on a while before.
It's hot, isn't it? When will autumn come? I like it, do you?
I looked at her, not knowing how to comfort her in the face of the pain that overwhelmed her as she remembered.
-But Dora, Pedro survived.
- Do you think so ? It's not even half of what it used to be, Ceci, and sometimes I think it's a completely different person.
He began drumming his fingers on the table. The tapping accompanied the clatter of the old fan blades, and outside, the engines of buses came and went, occasionally punctuated by the backfire of an exhaust pipe. He checked the time.
The children should be leaving school just now. I hope Pedro arrived on time. He once made them wait for over an hour. The teachers made a scene last time, but they get impatient because they want to meet the couples.
She began clearing the table, stacking the plates and cutlery on top of each other. She went to the kitchen, leaving the story she had been telling unfinished.
- Excuse me, Dora, I don't mean to be nosy, but since you started...
A laugh reached me from the kitchen, and she peeked out, resting her detergent-wet hands on the frame.
-But of course, forgive me, Ceci.
Without stopping washing the dishes, which were in the sink in five minutes, and then returning to the dining room, sitting down without letting go of the dish towel, she continued saying:
He was hospitalized for five months. The first month in intensive care, then in a regular ward, but every time he had surgery again, he spent a few days in intensive care. The surgeons slowly repaired his fractured skull piece by piece. They put in metal plates, but first they had to clean out the pus and the tissue that was the useless remnant of his injured brain. The bullet was one of the worst, Ceci, one of those that explodes as soon as they enter. All that time I was going back and forth between home and the hospital, and I got tired of it, for the children, of course. They kept asking about their father, and I had to deal with everything: keeping them as unaware of the drama as possible,

handling the paperwork with the health insurance company, and collecting the insurance money despite all the obstacles from the bureaucrats on duty. They told me he was stable, in a vegetative state or something like that. The electroencephalograms showed the basic activity to keep him alive. Sometimes I wished he would die. Do you know , I even thought about taking out the tubes he had connected to when I was alone with him in the room? You think I'm a bitch, don't you?

"No, Dora, anyone would have thought the same thing at some point. The difference is in doing it..."

"And you know what's the funniest thing about it? I didn't do it because there were security cameras. They were covered up, because they weren't used for security, but precisely for surveillance. Big shots could show up at a military hospital... That's the only reason I held back that one time I thought I was determined."

She sighed deeply and dried her tears with the dish towel.

"Thank goodness it's clean," she said, trying to regain her composure. Two more months passed, and then Pedro began to react. He moved his hands and opened his eyes. He followed me with his gaze and even smiled. The doctors explained that neuron repair in an adult is practically impossible, but it all depended on the damaged area. All I wanted to know was if I would have to take him home like that, like a log that needed to be moved, cleaned, and fed. I know I'm a bitch, but I was thinking about my children and myself. Pedro had already disappeared; he wasn't a man anymore, just a burden. To make a long story short, he recovered with the treatment from the physical therapist and the neurologists. His hair grew back, and he would get up and walk around the room on his own. He recognized the whole family, thankfully. But he didn't speak. When we asked him something, he would answer by nodding his head. We asked him to write the answer in a notebook, but when he picked up the pen, he couldn't write anything. We asked him to draw something, and he only made crooked lines. I saw him struggling to understand why he couldn't do it, because it was clear he remembered having done it once. Obviously, he couldn't read either. He would stare at the lines and follow them with the tip of his index finger, squinting and trying to move his lips to convince us, but the truth was he had no idea. I asked the doctors if

he was going to recover. They told me that we could try to teach him again like a child, but most likely that that area of his brain no longer existed. Exactly five months later, they discharged him. It was at home that he started to talk. He walked around the neighborhood, greeting all the neighbors who congratulated him and encouraged him. The first word he said was on the sidewalk, and I didn't hear it; it was the neighbor across the street and her husband who told me. Pedro was walking with the children, and when he stepped off the curb to cross the street, a car braked suddenly and blew a tire. The noise alarmed Pedro so much that he crouched down and hugged the boys, shielding them with his body. The neighbors told him it was nothing, to calm down, but he didn't open his arms or let go until more than fifteen minutes later, all the while shouting "Fire!"

Dora was crying uncontrollably. I took out the dish towel and gave her a clean handkerchief and paper napkins. I had to get up and go to the kitchen on my crutches to do that, but she barely scolded me when I came back. I hugged her.

"I should be the one comforting you," she said.

Don't worry. The important thing is that Pedro is okay; it's truly amazing that he's recovered...

-Yes, Ceci, but what for, you mean ? So they can take advantage of him?

-I don't understand you.

"In a way, he's a boy now. He's very hard of hearing in one ear and misses many conversations, sometimes saying yes or no just to avoid the embarrassment of admitting he didn't hear anything. And as for reading and writing, forget about it. He drives because Colonel Ansaldi took him under his wing when he found out what had happened. One day, he went for his routine checkup and ran into the colonel, who was also there for checkups related to the attack years before. Pedro stood there like a complete idiot, staring at him like he was a god. Ansaldi greeted him warmly and hugged him. 'It's been so long, my dear, I've lost track of you!' Those with him told him what had happened to Pedro that afternoon in Plaza de Mayo. He was just one of the security detail back then, even though he had saved his life before. Ansaldi insisted they hadn't told him anything. 'There was so much chaos those months...' 'That's true, Colonel, don't worry about it.'" Pedro spoke slowly,

and Ansaldi looked at him like someone observing a man who was no longer a policeman and could no longer hold a gun, with the eyes of a lamb. I saw the sorrow etched on Ansaldi's face, retrieved from some hidden depths of his soul, and as he dusted it off, he told Pedro that he would take care of his future from that moment on. "I would be an ungrateful wretch, my dear, a real and utter son of a bitch if I didn't protect the man who saved my life twice." He hugged him, patting him hard.
"And did he deliver?" I asked.
- Yes, Ceci, he kept his word like the devil does.

3

Dora left that night shortly after ten. She asked my permission to call a taxi. No, not to worry, she wouldn't indulge in that luxury every day, just because it was the first day and it had gotten late. She wanted to see me in bed before she left. I obliged, but then I got up and sat on the bed, my one leg dangling over the edge, not touching the floor, the stump resting on the mattress, barely visible. It was as short, as insignificant as the body it belonged to.
It started to hurt. They'd taken out the stitches, but the scar was still swollen. The phone rang on the nightstand, which had been put back in its place during my absence thanks to Bernardo's intervention. He was thinking of everything except the discomfort I was causing him. It was him, no doubt, or Renato. I had no desire to answer either of them; I had no right to refuse either of them.
-I'm fine. Yes, a little tired. No, I don't have a fever. Yes, I took the medication. No, you don't need to come.
The same answer for both in two conversations separated by five minutes.
I hung up the receiver and heard the taxi drive off, taking Dora with it. I sat there in the dark. I turned on the radio. I was about to turn it off after the military marches, the static-filled intermittent noises that sounded like thunder on that summer night, a protest chamamé, a Julio Iglesias ballad, and

the mellow sound of ABBA. But amidst the technical ups and downs and the rudimentary mediocrity of the state radio stations, a tango emerged, too melancholic and sad, sung by El Polaco . I turned up the volume when I heard the drizzle of *Garúa* , and the wind in the street pushing it as the summer wind had pushed me along the sidewalk. My missing leg was a ghost that would rot away in the hospital morgue, or perhaps some medical student would come along and dissect it, deconstructing my anatomy. Outside, the drizzle of autumn that would soon begin; inside, the restless hands of a man exploring in search of something new in the ever-old.

And the futile hope of that solitary, withdrawn student who perhaps liked corpses because they are silent and do not question, was perhaps also the hope I heard when Dora told me what had happened to her husband after the encounter with the colonel.

Ángel Ansaldi was retired from the military, but of course he retained his rank and all his prestige. He had even increased his influence and power by making contact with various personalities he hadn't been able to access before precisely because of his military service. Politicians from the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, journalists who spoke on his behalf in the media—all too easy to identify, because even the most brilliant minds succumb and aren't even capable of adequately concealing their true nature. Perhaps it's guilt that betrays them, or perhaps the opposite: pride. But above all, there were many businessmen surrounding Ansaldi, most of them too powerful to be known by name or by their whereabouts. It was said that he was one of the many partners in multinational corporations, beverage and food companies. The textile industry didn't seem to interest him. He was once heard to say, in interviews now lost or deleted, that men can live naked, but never without food, and especially not without water. But even the staggering figures of the multinationals that controlled and exploited alcoholic beverages weren't to his liking. In his offices on Avenida Libertador near Retiro—a few blocks from the port, which he had a privileged view of from the tall buildings of Las Catalinas, and the Customs House right there, full of respectful subordinates checking and classifying the million-dollar entries in his name, and going back and forth from the Kavanagh Building, where he was seen coming and going with a revue actress for whom he had bought an entire

floor right in the middle of that somewhat neglected but still distinguished relic—meetings were held with men from pharmaceutical laboratories. All acquaintances, of course, because there was nothing more commendable than investing in the research of those noble companies that worked for humanity. Where were the doctors? In their laboratories in Switzerland and Germany, and of course in many cities in the United States: Boston, Los Angeles, or Oesterville . Scattered everywhere, where no one could pinpoint them precisely. Cancer studies, and the endless string of viruses and bacteria preserved in tubes not always protected by uncertain safety measures, which, to be truly accurate, complied with the famous rule of exception, granting a welcome loophole.

Pedro Palacios, Dora's husband's surname, echoing the poet of prisoners and misfortune, was hired, so to speak. But why doubt the colonel's adherence to labor laws if he was a well-known figure? Perhaps that was the reason? The fact is, Palacios started working at one of the meatpacking plants where Ansaldi held shares, though he wasn't listed as the owner or manager. It was one of his many diverse investments, bearing the name Frigidaire, marketed nationally as a renowned refrigerator company, recognized for its quality. There were few middle-class homes where one couldn't find a product of that name. The most significant competitor at that time was Siam, but its clientele was primarily in working-class neighborhoods. It was said that Ansaldi's influence extended to them as well, and why not, since, after all, the men who trusted the man who championed their class were also from the same profession as Ansaldi. High-ranking military officers in those times were well regarded for their culture, and the chilling silence that was only interrupted by telephone calls, almost always anonymous, that preceded the great street outbursts where platoons of soldiers showed off their skills with weapons, tanks and bombs.

The branch of the company where Pedro worked was in Devoto. He was just another worker on the payroll, and he kept to the established schedule because he was used to those traditional middle-class routines. The alarm clock at seven, the bus stop, clocking in and out, and the bus ride home. Dora would ask him what tasks he did in the workshops, at least at first she

interrogated him because Pedro would come home wanting to talk about nothing but the children and the accounts.

"I was worried about the debts from the store, the butcher shop, the rent, and the pediatricians. We never lacked anything from then on, and Pedro's silence seemed to be an essential condition," she had told me.

After much coaxing, he would finally utter a few words: rewind, repair, and things like that. Pedro knew a lot about engines; his father had been a tractor mechanic in the countryside, but he wanted to join the police force after finishing school. He had a knack for mechanics and electricity, and it had never surprised anyone to see him repairing any machine, however complicated, whether it was a car engine, a television, or a hair dryer. He'd even fixed the record player at home, Dora said.

But he also started going to the workshops on weekends, without a fixed schedule, for a few hours that sometimes stretched into the whole night. Dora suspected he was cheating on her with one of the employees, but soon news reports appeared on television about the unions' strike threats. Frigidaire wasn't named, but it was known that all the factories under military control were going to be boycotted by the unions, who weren't satisfied with the cut they were getting.

Pedro became a sort of spokesperson for Ansaldi. On weekends, when he had to fulfill that role, he would leave home after saying goodbye to the kids and walk to the corner where a car would pick him up—a car that stood out from the others parked along the curbs in our neighborhood. By then, all the neighbors knew what was going on and didn't ask him any more questions. They probably knew more than Dora did at that point. She, however, had been a journalist and knew people who could inform her. She told me that she reconnected with Mario Marizza in meetings that were supposed to be clandestine, held in various bars in the city center. That's how she learned about the web woven by Ansaldi's interests; he was just one of the many who traded abroad and brought in goods that he passed off as legitimate: drugs disguised as legal, packages unloaded from ships in the Río de la Plata from Paraguay and Brazil and destined for Europe. And those that came in—impossible to specify.

Dora asked if there were women. Marizza shrugged: the women thing was known and tolerated as the most trivial effect of a larger pattern. But what was that pattern? Dora asked. Marizza replied that that's what imagination was for.

According to her, Mario had tried to scare her. I agreed; I knew him well from our time working together at the newsroom. For a while, she tried to persuade Pedro to resign. She told him they'd work things out, as they always had. Pedro, however, grew restless and would go for walks around the block. That was simply a no he couldn't utter without betraying his wife, but his loyalty to Colonel Ansaldi took precedence. As if having saved his life twice bound him to him for the rest of his life. I told her it wasn't unusual. When one man saves another's life, he's more obligated to the latter than the latter is to his savior. "I know," Dora told me, "but Pedro didn't see it that way." His loyalty was a conviction he couldn't renounce without ceasing to be himself. That was almost the only thing that had remained unscathed after the gunshot and the atrocity his brain had suffered. When Dora told me that Pedro was a different man after his recovery, it wasn't so much because of his habits, his tastes, or his moral values. All of that remained more or less unchanged. What she saw as different, she couldn't quite explain to me because she didn't know, and sometimes she thought her imagination was playing tricks on her. Just as she had once wished Pedro would die so she could have some peace, now she wished he would change too, so she would have an excuse to leave him someday. But she also knew she would never do that because at the heart of all those theories lay the bond they had woven when they were young, and their love was too pure and of such quality that the net, at the bottom of the stormy sea of those times, endured.

Discarding her doubts, Dora saw in Pedro's loyalty to Ansaldi an unassailable bastion, one the colonel had managed to seize before she could even put herself in Pedro's way to protect him. Pedro's loyalty was as solid as granite, fortified above all by stupidity. It was wrong of me to judge her husband this way, she told me, but we are precisely the ones who are hard on us, whether out of love or hate. The indifferent don't hurt us because they don't penetrate our world. Pedro's idiotic naiveté, whether natural or acquired after his illness, was the factor that excused him.

"Do you think, Dora, that if there's no memory there's no guilt?" I asked her.
"And what does memory have to do with it?" she replied. "Memory is the crucible of moral values," I told her. "The child who sticks his finger in the pot where the stew is cooking gets burned. The mother doesn't need to scold him; in her eyes he reads the rules that will condition him forever. In every moment and in every action he undertakes, he will see that face, which is the face of the law."
"The law is the written record, Dora. Ignorance is no excuse for someone who cannot read," I insisted.
I know I was confronting her with what she already knew, but I needed to overlook it to continue living with Pedro and for the sake of our children. That's why she looked at me for the first time since we met as if she didn't understand, when two days later, seeing the truck arrive from the balcony, I yelled to Pedro before going to work.
"Do you need anything, Cecilia?" he asked me.
-I need a job, Pedro. Do you know of any openings at the factory?
That was the moment Dora came out of the kitchen and looked at me that way. After what we had talked about, she didn't understand why I wanted to walk into the lion's den. That's just how I am, I wanted to tell her, my most trivial needs often hide more serious ones with darker aims. Above all else was my financial need; I couldn't continue to recover without Bernardo's help. Then, my spirits required support, something to prop myself up with to distract me from the depression, and journalistic curiosity was an irreplaceable spur. And finally, deep down, but rapidly gaining ground, was the need to find myself in situations that involved a certain danger, as if that way I could hasten the end of my life without the constant reproach of my conscience. There was an obstacle I myself was creating in the face of the path that my body's deterioration inevitably marked: fear. One way to avoid it was to disguise it, but it was always there, at the end of each night of thoughts swimming in desolation. But there was another way to avoid it: to disconcert him by exposing myself to the arguments he thought he was using to terrify me. And in that way, destroy him.
Pedro looked at his wife, as if asking for permission. She shrugged and went back to the kitchen.

-It seems like a coincidence, doesn't it? They're actually looking for an employee for the claims department.
- And what does that job consist of, Pedro?
"It's a secretarial job, Cecilia, an office job. I understand that you receive letters from customers and complaints about warranties and defects. You would have to read them, classify them, and pass them on to your boss."
- Do you think they'll accept me like this, I mean, with my disability?
-Come with me and there won't be a problem.
Dora had already sat down and was preparing mate for us. Resigned to not understanding and accepting, that was her way of life.
"It's a desk job," he told me. "There's nothing more suitable for you, plus you'd be at ease, reading."
-Yes- I told him- Nonsense that I would have to discard by ninety percent.
"If the boss heard her," said Pedro, "he'd already be working."
We decided I would accompany him the next day. I needed not only to prepare myself mentally, but also to tidy up my physical appearance a bit.

The morning we went to the factory was a Wednesday, a dreaded day for any factory manager. To the problems inherited on Mondays, which barely seemed to be getting resolved, were added those of the middle of the week: suppliers, machines breaking down, employees getting hurt, others protesting, orders from the board imposing new regulations before the previous ones had even been understood or implemented, and above all, the constant pressure for high performance, which in those days was little more than the need to keep the company from going bankrupt by maintaining minimum production levels. All of that was evident in the puffy face of the man whose office we entered.
The building in Villa Devoto was enormous. Far from the commercial center, it occupied an entire triangular block between an avenue and two streets. The traditional residential feel surrounded the building with its old facade, built perhaps in the 1940s, when Devoto was still a neighborhood of country houses and rather desolate. The company's first branch had been built there. The main headquarters were somewhere in Paraguay or Brazil. I hadn't managed to get Pedro to explain much while he drove; he didn't speak in any

particular order, only carefully constructing his sentences to the point of mistaking him, to anyone who didn't know him, for a well-mannered and cultured person. He was, of course, the former, and I wondered to what extent he was the latter. One of the things Dora had missed since her illness and after she started working in the workshop was the ambivalence between her expansive nature and a taciturnity bordering on the pensive, as if she were ruminating on things she couldn't digest, but couldn't get rid of. How can we understand such a complex dichotomy? Perhaps I, an impartial witness, could decipher it.

Pedro's face lit up with pride as we entered Arnaldo Aranguren's office, a room with a high ceiling and a fan that turned very slowly. A large window behind the desk, piled high with papers, barely revealed the wood, polished by years of use. The shelves overflowing with documents and files were antiquated and drab, the walls peeling and stained with damp patches forming strange patterns, like maps. Suddenly, I felt as if I had stepped into a stagnant space in time, where many things would be explained to me in order to understand the intricate workings of the engineering built around the original factory. A refrigerator factory that had expanded over time into other areas, but everything was related to refrigeration.

- Does the fan bother you, miss?

I had seen that I glanced up at the ceiling once or twice.

- Are you cold, perhaps?

Was it a recrimination? The man was a little over sixty, tall and thin, with a barely noticeable belly beneath his shirt and tie. He dressed like any down-on-his-luck factory manager of the time, in an ordinary suit, his tie knot neatly tied, his gray hair slicked back with shades of gray that gave him a ceremonious yet down-to-earth appearance. Sometimes his face, even without a smile, was affectionate and familiar, like an uncle one visits now and then, perhaps still single, in his old, musty-smelling apartment.

I told him not to worry, I was just struck by how nice the office was.

"I appreciate the compliment, but there's no need to be condescending. Our friend Pedro has told me a bit about you, and I have the opportunity to verify what he said."

Pedro, who had been standing by the door, looked down at the floor.

"I would appreciate it if you would leave us alone, my friend. How foolish of me, Miss Taboada! Please, have a seat." He helped me with my crutches, leaning them against the wall, and sat back down behind the desk.
"And what are your expectations, miss? It's my duty to tell you that we're short on resources these days, and the reason we're hiring new staff is because the former head of the claims office just retired. Due to the usual, but no less reprehensible, oversights, no one bothered to find a replacement. With that said, I want to make it clear that you shouldn't expect a very high salary, unfortunately."
As he spoke, I had been glancing at the pictures on the walls, mostly photographic portraits of men with long mustaches from another era. The founders, perhaps, and others in military uniforms as well. I recognized Roca, for example, and General Justo too.
-It's not a problem for me, of course, Mr. Aranguren, as long as it represents the minimum agreed by the laws.
-I think you're overrated for this job, miss.
- Is that a no?
He laughed, trying to dispel the bad impression his statement made.
-None of that, I was just trying to tell you that maybe, just maybe, we expect more from you than your official duties.
- Like what, for example?
I could already see how my spirit was revealing itself.
"Don't misunderstand me, sometimes I try to be both direct and discreet, and at my age I should know it's impossible. What I'm trying to explain is that the complaints office receives many conflicts, most of them pure nonsense and trivialities, but some are legitimate complaints that are resolved sooner or later, others aren't, and these are the ones that cause real headaches. When I say you're overqualified, I'm referring to the simple task of reading and classifying. You, however, from what I've been told, are an intelligent person with a high degree of discernment. We need someone in that office who not only distinguishes between reality and people's fantasies, but who also takes the time to respond to them as if that customer who bought one of our products were the most important of all. Most people just want to be heard, and they're satisfied with that, but for that, it's necessary to respond with a

few kind words. In these modern times, as you know, nobody takes that time, and silence is a malicious accomplice."

Was it possible that all that rhetoric concealed subliminal messages about the military process and the government's situation? Silence makes us complicit, even that indirect allusion to what is just, when I had just seen the portrait of the general who had governed the country during what some called the infamous decade.

The man who was speaking to me seemed increasingly strange. I didn't yet know if he was intellectually seducing me, penetrating my spirit in that way. He was a psychologist without any degree, more so than someone who makes refrigeration motors.

-I understand, Mr. Aranguren. I don't dislike any of it.

"Very well, miss. And as I was saying, you'll also have the responsibility of handling the most unpleasant complaints. Obtuse and rude people trying to take advantage of you. You'll try to convince them politely, but firmly. Then there are the important issues, which you'll have to leave in our hands, of course, since they involve legal matters. You'll easily distinguish some because they're so direct; others will involve veiled threats, and that's what your scrutiny will consist of. To grasp certain subtleties, you have to be a good reader, and for that, you'll be extremely helpful."

It was almost noon. The sun streamed through the open curtains of the large window. I squinted and shielded my face when the morning clouds suddenly parted, letting the intense glare of the sun, which had been hidden, pierce through. The sun seemed to be taking its revenge, putting me at a disadvantage with the man who was going to hire me. I was a scrawny, asymmetrical figure, despite having dressed well and styled my hair as a secretary was supposed to. In front of me, and because of the light, I could see only the dark shadow of a man whose voice was as dubious as his words. She got up and closed the thick curtains. The office grew dark, but as my eyes adjusted, the light was now sufficient and warm.

"Excuse me, miss. Are you feeling alright? Have some water." She handed me a glass she'd retrieved from the piles of folders and water from a pitcher she'd taken from a low refrigerator tucked away in a corner, disguised as a wooden cabinet. On top of it was a plastic tray and crumpled papers.

-Mr. Aranguren, I appreciate your praise, but you will already know about my journalistic background, and some of my opinions.
He nodded, moving his hands to downplay what I was saying.
"Don't worry about that, miss. Having worked with Mr. Beltrame is already a guarantee for us. And as for your ideas, who are we to take away your principles, or whatever you want to call them, as long as you do your job properly? Loyalty and efficiency are the only things we should all abide by in this country."
That's the end of the conversation, I told myself. I was already fully immersed in the conflict. The architecture was designed, and the engineering of events had constructed the edifice in which I had been immersed ever since.

4

I started working the following week after submitting the usual paperwork and the medical certificate Bernardo gave me. Our relationship was strained, although we sometimes relaxed, like that afternoon when he came to see me after the hospital.
"Are you still seeing González?" he asked after placing the certificate on the nightstand next to the bed. It was jealousy, yes, a little, but also that need to worry about the woman he couldn't get rid of.
-Since the operation, no...
-Or since we crossed paths at the hospital...
"I never knew what you said to him." I crossed my arms and frowned, feigning anger, half jokingly, half seriously, as I recalled those unresolved issues. "You never messed with my friends, but with him..."
"That guy's not good for you, Ceci, he gives me the creeps..."
I laughed at that unprofessional expression. I figured he must be going to his hometown more often.

At the factory, they assigned me the previous employee's office. Everything was exactly as she had left it when she retired, but organized in folders and index cards labeled with pending tasks, claims in progress or about to be initiated, and a series of typed recommendations corrected in the margins with additions in neat, feminine handwriting, reminiscent of calligraphy learned in teacher training. It reminded me of my mother. Suddenly, I felt dizzy and had to hold onto the desk, even though I was sitting down. It was probably the memories that came flooding back after having accumulated all that time when my health and the operation had relegated my mother's memory to almost the background. I took my medication, dried my eyes before anyone came in, and started my work.

The room was narrow but long, and along the long, high facing walls were shelves crammed with papers and files. At the far end, a large window overlooked Cabezón Street, as the employees called it. Plenty of light streamed in all day, so I rarely needed to turn on the lights, and my eyes were very grateful for that, especially after two in the afternoon, when the most urgent work was done, and I would sit with my back to the window reading the letters that seemed less important.

I was welcomed warmly by the factory workers, ninety percent of them men, of course. The women were the cleaning staff, whom I would see when I arrived in the morning, mopping the floors and dusting the shelves, or when they passed by on my way to lunch. However, when I stayed for just a cup of tea or coffee to finish something, one of them would come in without knocking, initially surprised, but then, accustomed to my habits, apologize and mop the floor around me and under my desk, without me interrupting my work on the Remington typewriter that my predecessor had cherished like a relic and which worked better than any of the modern ones. Once, while one of the women was cleaning, seeing how dirty my fingers were getting while changing the ribbon, she offered me a damp cloth.

"Thank you," I said.

"No need, miss," I said, and I saw that she couldn't help but glance sideways at my cut leg. I understood then the reason for those cleanings, which weren't at the usual times. I'd been told something before, but I wasn't familiar with the customs back then. The women coming in while I was working, cleaning

under the desk as I wrote, and feeling the broom or mop brush against my only shoe. They, not the men, were the ones who made me feel different. Should I thank them? Perhaps, because despite the short time I'd been there, I was already starting to feel comfortable, almost relaxed and accepted. And almost, for a few moments, happy.

In the large, high-ceilinged dining room, which had a somewhat convent-like feel, the hustle and bustle was deafening from noon until 1:30 in the afternoon. Workers and administrative staff, bosses and foremen, all mingled and sat on what looked like an Art Nouveau tapestry to anyone viewing the dining room from a distance. Long, old, sturdy tables and chairs of all kinds—some original to the furniture, others bought from the furniture store two blocks away, kitchen chairs, wicker chairs like those from an old patio, some I guessed the men had brought from their homes, and others so rickety they provoked laughter when the occasional occupant fell backward . Everyone laughed, everyone spoke loudly, except for those who, like islands, remained silent as they ate, alone. The first time I entered, most of them stared at me, following my steps on foot and with my crutch, the sound of my heel clicking against the rubber tip of the crutch. It was an odd noise, a kind of rhythm that grated on ears accustomed to harmonious music. I stood there for a few seconds, stared at by those looks and the abrupt silence.

"I'm sorry," I said. Tears almost came to my eyes, though in my soul I felt anger and fury, both of us struggling to prevail and finally, weary, letting bitterness take over.

"It doesn't matter, miss," said Pedro, whom I hadn't noticed among so many others, dressed in the blue jumpsuit and covered in grease. He approached without touching me, barely accompanying me to make room for me beside him.

No one dared say anything inappropriate from that moment on. They looked at Pedro before speaking to me, but later it wasn't necessary. During that day and the days that followed, there was no silence or respectful resentment, but rather a complicity that did me good because it implied no differences. Even so, the occasional crude and sexually suggestive joke slipped through, sometimes breaking the monotonous routine of respect. The few other women who worked in administration and reception, or the telephone operators, kept

their distance, trying to attract the attention they suddenly felt they had lost from the men. They sought the difference, the vulgarity they frowned upon but needed to feel, perhaps, like women in that sea of men. Because we were nothing with our self-imposed silence and our barely hinted coquetry, so as not to be misunderstood. Three of them were secretaries and office workers; perhaps they were single, or widowed, or lived with their parents. Two of them were married and had grown children; they were the only ones who spoke to me in the women's bathroom, a makeshift hovel after many years of complaining.

"They like you because they don't see you like they see us," one of them told me, while looking at herself in the rusty mirror where only her fat face fit, trying to put on makeup.

I got up from the toilet, juggling my underwear and grabbing my crutch so I wouldn't fall. Maybe she saw me in the mirror, I don't know. Then another woman came in, sat down, and looked at me for a while.

"You should demand they put a wall mount on it." Without looking at me again, he started smoking.

The other one laughed and turned away.

" Forgive me , but she doesn't know what she's talking about. It took us fifteen years to get the bosses to fix this place up for us. Before, we had to go to the bathroom at the bar on the avenue, or go into the men's room, where they were used to seeing us walk into the stalls while they peed in the urinals, or who knows what else they were doing."

They laughed, I ignored them, but before leaving, I remembered what the other woman had said to her reflection. It was their laughter that provoked me.

- What did you mean earlier, when you said that they love me even though they don't see me the way they see you?

The other one, whose name was Cintia, I think, thought for a while.

"Ah, right, that's why... dear," she said, pointing at the crutch with her lipstick. "They don't see you as a woman, in a bad way, of course. You work in peace, but they don't leave us alone."

I heard laughter coming from the toilet after the cigarette smoke.

-That's what you wish, old woman.

When I went outside, I heard them arguing.
Yes, the men saw me as one of them because I didn't talk about makeup, boys, dresses, or artists. Word got around that I wrote and was a journalist, and the conversations in the cafeteria shifted from Saturday nights out, girlfriends, and the women from the previous weekend's brothel to political discussions, which were never well-received there. The bosses, who didn't discriminate based on rank, except for Aranguren, of course, who ate lunch in his office, but who nevertheless circulated among the tables two or three times a week, shaking hands and sometimes even sitting down to chat. There was a whiff of something shady in the company's political atmosphere, which, despite being private, had connections that entangled it with the governments in power. This had been known for many years, but it was something I'd heard from journalists who tried to be independent and were later silenced, never to be heard from again. The workers, then, who had much to lose, contained their anxieties, which in the end did not cost them much when they could talk about women and sex, things that took them a lot of time to talk and headaches, because women were difficult to understand.
That's how Pedro explained it to me one day when he was driving me home. I usually took the bus, except when we happened to be going back at the same time. I came to realize that he was a very important man at the factory. Dressed like any other anonymous worker, he would wander around all the different areas after his shift ended: workshops, warehouses, the garage, the offices. I noticed that his hands were calloused and covered in chronic grease stains.
"They're not coming out anymore, are they?" I asked him.
"If you could have seen me a few years ago, Ceci. I had neat hands and clean nails, because in the Force that's a mark of distinction. Now I can't get rid of them. It's the grease they use, who knows!"
I don't know why, I thought of Lady Macbeth.
-Pedro, do you think the boys see me differently than the others?
He reacted angrily with a click of his tongue.
-That bitch Cintia already talked to you, didn't she? Don't pay any attention to her and don't get upset.
-That's partly true, I think, Pedro. I'm a bit of a tomboy.

Another click.
"Did you see yourself in the mirror, Cecilia? The boys talk to me because they know I brought you here. They think you're beautiful, with that brown hair and those hazel eyes, but they don't dare approach you. It's partly because of the surgery—what can you do? But it's also because of what they talk about with you, the things you say. You're different from the ordinary women they deal with every day."
"I'm a monster of thoughts," I told myself.
-They are afraid of me.
-They respect her.
- Isn't it sometimes the same thing?
He shrugged.
"What do I know? But let me tell you something. Men like us are nothing compared to ordinary women. My Dora is intelligent, she writes, and she has such an amazing inner world that I can't even understand what she's reading to me, but when she goes to the store, she chats casually with the other women about boys, diapers, and the house. Without her, I would have died of anguish, and you can't imagine how I can't forgive myself for having disappointed her."
I wasn't expecting that turn in the conversation. We were arriving at Once, the avenue packed with cars.
- Why do you say that?
Another click, a sniff like swallowing snot, and another shrug of the shoulders. I noticed the scar on his skull throbbing slightly, or maybe it was my imagination.
Something was wrong with Pedro, something he couldn't quite put his finger on, but it was the only thing he could do. He left me hanging at the building entrance, and I didn't ask him about it. He shook my hand. When I picked up the apartment keys, I noticed my right hand was dirty with something that wasn't grease. I wiped it off when I went inside, but I couldn't smell it until I showered the next morning.

The folder of pending complaint letters had been piling up since the previous employee's retirement. While restarting the ones already in progress, I

thought I'd catch up on the older ones, some of which might be important. That was Aranguren's request at the end of my first week. He came in after knocking and waiting for permission. He was already giving me the task when he saw me sitting with a letter from two months prior. He apologized profusely.

-I see I don't need to tell you anything…

-Please tell me everything you consider necessary.

"That's how it will be, but from what I can see, I don't think it will bother her too much. The previous employee was a frail old woman; she'd been diagnosed with Alzheimer's."

The furor is back.

- And is that a bad thing, Mr. Aranguren?

-In an illness, miss.

-I know, Mr. Aranguren. That's what my mother died of recently.

Did he apologize? Just enough to show that good manners were readily available to him for any eventuality. Behind his eyes, framed by small glasses, I saw the anger. I enjoyed watching him pretend it didn't hurt.

The letter I had begun to read was dated two months prior, in the middle of summer. It was from a woman in Paraná. I was about to throw it in the wastebasket after reading two lines because it began with family matters that seemed completely unrelated to a complaint against the company, but then I spotted the word Frigidaire in the middle of the page and a water stain covering the following words. I got up and sat down in the chair by the window, ready to delve into what would later become a habit: digging into the lives of the people who wrote to me.

It wasn't a complaint in the strict sense, nor a request for repairs, a product exchange, an expired warranty claim, or even a simple need to complain because the baby's milk had curdled due to a malfunctioning appliance. It was an explanation, perhaps, a statement of facts by a woman who was clearly mentally unstable, or at least traumatized by the situation she had endured, which had left her bedridden with a depression from which she emerged only to operate based on delusions, yet which nevertheless allowed her to express herself correctly in writing. Her grammar, however, was riddled with glaring errors at times, at odds with the vocabulary and turns of phrase that

suggested a certain level of education. This became clear to me as I turned the pages, twenty or twenty-five of them, with small, cramped print at times, at others large and crooked like a child's handwriting.

Her name was Dominga, and she lived in Paraná, working as a maid. She attended primary school at night, whenever sleep and the medication she was given allowed. The work was unstable, and she admitted it was her fault. Who would hire just anyone who arrived late or fell asleep while scrubbing clothes in the yard? But somehow, she managed to get by because she had sisters whose family obligations she knew how to exploit as much as possible. She had come from Buenos Aires after her husband threw her out of the ranch near General Lavalle. He had thrown her out for being a whore, but all she had done was have a few drinks at the town store. She didn't remember what happened afterward, but she wished things had been better than what had been going on for some time with Nicanor, her husband, who hadn't touched her in ages, and she wasn't even sure she wanted to. She knew men, especially the Espinoza brothers; she had been involved with two of them. First with the brother, who ran away the day after killing the eldest of the three, then with Nicanor. Both had turned out to be murderers, one by his own hand, the other, out of sheer stupidity. They had bought a refrigerator, and the husband and son had gone to pick it up in town. When they were returning, the bridge that crossed the river was closed. The current was swollen from the winter rains, the same ones responsible for the flooded fields. Nicanor decided to cross in the pickup truck, a sturdy one he had recently bought from the last boss he had worked for, the one he used to drive all over the towns and roads of the province. He hauled bales and cattle that were a sight to behold. But that day the truck got stuck. The son took the wheel when Nicanor got out to push. And when it was freed from the rocks, the current swept the truck and the boy away, and he, like an idiot, was left stuck with his foot on a rock at the bottom. The father alive and the son dead. She had run out of ways to reproach him for his stupidity; she had exhausted them all over the course of several months. And when she no longer knew what to say, she didn't need to say anything more, because she realized she had drained her husband's soul of pride. He was now a drunkard, a pair of hands good for nothing but beating him after she had emptied herself of

insults. Twice they had gone to bed together after the boy's death, and both times he had torn her and made her bleed from the blows. For her, it was impossible to leave him, and she didn't know why. He was the boy she no longer had, the teenager in whom she had seen the future body of his father. Finally, one day she let herself be seen, or made herself seen, by the town gossips, who carried the news to Nicanor. Dominga, drunk, was rubbing the crotch of one of the many truckers who stopped there, behind a table in Saverio's store. Then he kicked her out, dragging her to the road where she waited for the bus. After that, she wandered from city to city.

Why had she written that letter? I wondered. It couldn't be possible that she blamed the company for her son's death. It was complete madness, but I found the logic behind it in the feelings she didn't quite express, feelings that emerged from the blank spaces. That letter was a kind of release. Who knows how that woman felt after writing it and putting it in the mailbox? Maybe she was the same, or maybe she had committed suicide. Now that she had said everything, there was nothing more to say. When there are no more arguments, where can one find reasons to live?

What made me keep that letter wasn't just curiosity or morbid fascination disguised as sentimentality or social awareness, but rather that I remembered the Espinoza brothers' case because Beltrame had covered the story for several weeks, trying to track down Pedro, Nicanor's brother, who had killed the older brother. He had run away with a tall, thin man, and no one ever saw him again.

His name was Pedro, and that had happened about ten years before.

Dora's husband was a policeman at that time, in Buenos Aires.

Pedro, the one with the scar that marked the failure of his memory.

We had spoken with Beltrame many times about cases like these, and he had been obsessed for a while with finding a plausible conclusion to the question of whether a lack of memory of the crime could exonerate the murderer. I know that some acts conceal others, like layers of concrete, some poured deliberately, others by the curious obsequiousness of circumstances. Time heals nothing and distorts everything; that's why it survives. Bernardo once told me about a patient he had operated on because the woman he killed had stabbed him before dying, and the man survived the operation. Nothing is

reliable in the hands of men, he had told me, because they are made of flesh, and flesh is time. Flesh is space, volume, size, measure. It is touched because it is mass, and that mass does not exist in infinity or timelessness. Time disturbs everything. Time is a traitor that always gives warning beforehand, but speaks so softly, so submissively softly, that not even those who hear it can escape it. Time is always there, just as every hour is always there. If you can't beat it, I told Bernardo that time, it's okay to betray it. Time is our God, Ceci, he told me, the god of doctors, the one who grants and the one who takes away, and it's not right to betray it.
But I know there is a way.

All these thoughts about Pedro dominated my mind in a proverbial way. Letting my imagination run wild seemed absurd and disloyal of me to the couple who were helping me so much. Dora, with her support since my diary days and her unconditional help by coming to my house every day after my operation, and Pedro, by getting me a job. But every time I ran into him at the factory or he gave me a ride, I saw something different, and it wasn't just the whims of my imagination. After all this time, I recognized that intuition that had led me so often during my work as a journalist to pick up on certain reservations in interviewees, translated into signs, whether involuntary eye movements, wrinkles on their foreheads, or hand gestures. But it was almost always what they didn't say that revealed what they were thinking, almost as if I could read their closed lips. Witchcraft like my cousin Leticia's? No, it's simply what we call intuition, which is nothing more than the concatenation of associations previously verified on numerous occasions. Men and women are creatures of habit; we are more reflexes and instincts than elaborate thought. That's why the flesh prevails, with its nerves and the blood that nourishes them.
Since I wasn't spending much time at the apartment, Dora would come over to help me with things around the house some nights, for an hour or two, and sometimes just to chat about anything and everything. She'd ask me how I was feeling. If it weren't for my leg and my body's constant lament, I would have answered that I was happy. I hadn't called Leonardo González in a long time, and I didn't need morphine or any other drug. Work occupied my

thoughts; the letters were a kind of therapy where I saw clinical cases pass by one after another, and in each one, I tried to make a diagnosis. I was tempted several times to ask Dora about Pedro, how she had met him, if he had ever told her about his childhood or what he had done before becoming a policeman. The only time I dared, I almost ended our friendship, and although it didn't, it was never the same.
She was tired. One of the boys had fallen off a slide in the park and hit his head. He was hospitalized for two days for observation because he had fainted when he fell. He was doing well now, but a little slow in his reactions. She was afraid, she told me, that he would end up with a developmental disability like Pedro. That's when I saw my opportunity.
"Don't worry, the boys have a great capacity for recovery, Bernardo always tells me that. And tell me, how did you meet Pedro?"
We were on the sofa, with the television on, but without volume, Roberto Maidana was probably talking about football or the cold war, a long-haired player was running with a ball and the next second Nikita Khrushchev appeared.
"I was working at the newspaper back then, in the general news section. Feminism and women's rights weren't fashionable yet when the supplements dedicated to us appeared, which only served to further pigeonhole us into clichés. I covered everything and nobody said a word to me. One day they asked me to go and find out about the disappearance of a woman in General Lavalle. The people and neighbors of the half-built house where the woman had lived couldn't tell me anything other than that she had a lover who visited her from time to time, and each time he came he'd lay a few bricks and then leave again until a month later, when he'd lay more bricks, but he was probably putting more effort into doing other, less constructive things in bed." She laughed, I couldn't.
Some people said that the last Sunday they saw her in the neighborhood, the man was with a friend and they spent the whole day inside. On Monday, the man was alone and they didn't see the friend or the woman leave. At the police station, they gave me the usual evasive answers.
- So why did they attach so much importance to it that they sent you to investigate?

-Because the press director at the time told me that the same guy who had killed a brother in the same area had been recognized as Maria's lover, that was the girl's name.
- And what was his name?
"Pedro Espinoza." Dora laughed again, uncomfortably. She didn't like the coincidence of the name. "Like my Pedro... I already met him in La Plata. Because, I'm telling you, after asking around, I found out that two similar-looking guys had been seen in a pickup truck on the way to La Plata. It was highly unlikely they were the same ones. Do you know how many men you see going from town to town doing odd jobs? And almost all of them look very similar: dark hair, thin but with bodies tough from working in the fields, wearing berets and boots, and bearded. Most of them are quiet when they're not drunk, and even then they're not very talkative."
Dora took a deep breath, thinking, remembering.
In La Plata, I went to the police station where a colleague had a friend who passed him information for the newspaper. I met him, and it turned out to be my Pedro. He was young, ten years younger, not too much, but a lot considering what happened later. He had only joined the police force a few months before. We liked each other from the start. Seeing him with that dark complexion, the uniform, the slender body, and the hairy hands, I was already imagining sleeping with him. And him, well, you can imagine. We met at a small bar near the Cathedral. He came in civilian clothes, and he looked even more handsome. We talked about the case. He told me they found the burned remains of the woman and her lover in a field in a vacant lot. "And the other man?" I asked. "Which other man?" I'd been told there were two men with her that last Sunday. Pedro laughed uncomfortably; he didn't know how to speak to me directly. He said I was a woman, and I replied that I was also a journalist, but Pedro was still a country man with vestiges of staunch machismo. He thought that decent women's ears weren't prepared for certain things. "Well, damn it," he said. "The two men shared her, you understand, Dora? It seems they had a fight. The lover's friend left that night. A couple of neighbors who get up around four to start their chores saw him run like a thin shadow, and the dogs barked at him more than at any other man. He looked like death," they repeated. "Country superstitions, Dora, what can you do?"

"So," I asked Dora, "María and Pedro were murdered by that skinny man? For revenge? A pure crime of passion? And they never found him?"
"Stop, stop for a moment. One thing at a time." He frowned and asked me:
- Why so much curiosity?
-Nothing, just... I don't know. It's part of the job, you know. But go on, tell me …
"Nothing more was ever heard, Ceci. The alleged murderer was never found; he was as thin as death" was the title of the column I was given in Saturday's edition. Case closed. But that's how I met Pedro.
Dora settled back on the sofa, her gaze fixed on the silent screen, as if both avoiding and spying on me at the same time.
I had to ask her. I couldn't avoid it; I couldn't bear the sight of that woman deliberately lying to herself to maintain the fiction that made her happy. I idolized the truth, even if it destroyed half the world, including me. If my body showed no mercy to my soul, if my body was an unyielding confession of every pain in every minute of my life, why should others have to perpetuate it behind the fragile shield of excuses, or the symbolism of motherhood? All to protect the children? From what? The truth disguises itself, but it always lurks.
- Do you know , Dora, what Pedro's mother's last name is?
He looked at me resentfully.
-You were rummaging through the trash...
-If that's what you call libraries and old newspapers with pages half-stuck together from the humidity…
"Palacios, that was the mother's name. She was a single mother," he told me, cutting off my next question. "The father ran away," Pedro told me.
- And you believed him ?
"I believed everything you said, Cecilia. By the end of the month we met, I was already pregnant with the baby who just left the hospital, and who may be disabled forever."
Since then Dora spoke to me on the phone, when I called her, and she never visited me again.

I had no doubt about who Pedro really was, but there were weaknesses in my already well-founded suspicions. Above all, I was troubled by his motives, the apparent irrationality of his actions. And the first thing I had to determine was whether his aphasia was genuine. To that end, I devised a rudimentary plan that could very well fail and be quite flimsy in its certain results, but it would give me some guidelines to follow.

One of the many days he drove me home from work, I said to him as I got out of the truck:

-Pedro, I need a favor.

-Tell me, miss.

-I applied for a loan at the bank, and I would need you to sign some papers as a guarantor.

"But you know I can't write. Do you want me to talk to Aranguren?"

No, I don't want to ask favors of people I barely know. I'll give you the name and you scribble something.

She gave in and we went up to the apartment. We talked about the boys while I made coffee and looked for a random form in my drawers.

-Here you go, Pedro.

I gave him a pen and waited. If he really couldn't read, he'd scribble without looking. But he glanced at the page for a few seconds, like someone reading quickly and skimming. He didn't look up at me. Was he pretending? Probably. Dora might have warned him of my suspicions, or he was simply too clever to give himself away with a glance. He signed it, making an almost childlike squiggle. I wondered what his real act was: whether he was ashamed of not knowing how to read and was pretending to try, which was part of his dim-witted and submissive personality, or whether he'd realized my trap and was just playing along.

-Thank you, Pedro. I put your full name here. Pedro Espinoza, is that okay?

Then he looked up and placed the coffee cup on the saucer, which broke.

"Sorry," he said.

"I'm sorry to have surprised you, Pedro, but I had no other choice but to invent this stratagem. Call it journalistic trickery if you like."

He stood up and paced around the sofa like a caged animal. He kept staring at me, and I followed him with my eyes, clutching my skirt with sweaty hands. Standing behind me, he said:
- Do you know there are things I don't remember, Cecilia?
-That's what they told me, Pedro.
-But the ones I want to forget, I can't.
-That often happens, unfortunately.
- And what about those things I can't forget, which are like bitter food?
-Surely, I understand very well.
-My heart is bitter, Cecilia, but it is my heart, after all.
-Yes, Pedro, I know. And we carry it with us always, and it doesn't let us forget. It's like a bitter taste that always returns to our throats, isn't it?
He sat down again.
You understand very well, Cecilia. Dora forgives me because she loves me, I suppose…
-Or because he is too realistic to allow himself the luxury of having his heart made of any material other than stone.
Somehow, I knew that man wasn't one man, but many.
- Will you tell me who you are, Pedro?
He checked the time on his wristwatch. He tapped it gently with his index finger, as if the hands had stopped.
Dora must be home with the boys by now. Do you want me to leave?
"We're not in a position to choose, Pedro. Don't you think?"
He leaned back on the sofa next to me. He placed his arms on the edge, almost touching me, and stretched out his legs like a tired husband sprawling out to rest after work.
I got together with Dominga even before my father died. She was a whore, I knew that, but I liked her too much not to have her. We had four children in those eight years. That way I could keep her at home, I told myself, and that's how it was for a while. Farm work was too hard, as always. Lost harvests, mortgages, the kids getting sick. The youngest died; the doctor said we'd forgotten about the vaccinations. Did we forget? I don't remember. Dominga took care of that. The day we buried him, we fought. She told me he wasn't mine, then she said the same thing about the others, but she started crying

like a madwoman and took it back. I grabbed her and started slapping her to make her tell me the truth. I was out of my mind, what did she want? She'd say one, then another, until I couldn't get anything out of her but screams and whimpers. The kids were watching us. Whose are they? Tell me, or I'll kill you in front of them! The priest's, you know ? The grocer's, the doctor's, and that farmhand's, the skinny one, I was dying to have him! She was challenging me, of course, but how could I deny it wasn't true? She told me they fucked her until she saw heaven and paradise and all that bullshit, you whore. So I threw her to the ground, and since I couldn't kill the seed of all those men, I decided to kill the flowers.

Nothing was known about that, nothing had been reported in the newspapers. "I killed them, and it was easier than I'd ever imagined. She watched me wrap them in the sheet and carry the bundle on my shoulders toward the fields. She followed me, stumbling over the thistles, in the dead of night, shouting but no one answered except the dogs. The neighbors were used to our fights, and besides, they were far away. We were two monsters walking a grueling odyssey through the darkness of the countryside. I threw them into the cesspool of an old quarry that had collapsed long ago and was crumbling even more during heavy rains. Later, the floods covered everything. Dominga threw herself to the ground, weeping. I bent down beside her for a moment, pulling up thistles, roots and all, and tore them apart in my hands, cutting myself until I bled. Because they didn't bleed, Cecilia, my hands were clean, and that worried me."

It was too much, even for my mind, greedy for twisted desires.

-But I don't understand, when did he kill his brother Raúl?

That very morning I woke up to my older brother's shouts, like he was returning from a war he'd won in his tank. I couldn't stand it. Dominga was naked in bed. I'd dragged her from the fields, and her clothes had been ripped by the rocks. When we got to the ranch, I told her that now she'd finally have my children. I took her completely, you know what that means, Cecilia? In the morning, with the sun streaming through the door we'd left open, she was still begging me to give her children. I laughed, of course, already tired of her body. While I was putting on my pants, I saw my brother's new tractor in the

distance, and his whole happy family. Then I took the shotgun from under the bed and went outside.
It was midnight. The phone rang. It was Dora, asking if Pedro was still with me.
-Yes, here he is. Nothing, Dora, he got sick while driving, so he lay down on the sofa. Let them know at work tomorrow. Yes, I know you have to take care of the boy; it's not right to leave him alone. Don't worry about your husband; he'll take a taxi early tomorrow or drive himself if he's well. You're welcome, Dora. Yes, I'll watch him for you, don't worry.
Pedro looked at me, while I looked back at him.
"I know what Dora's thinking," he told me. "She's clinging to that to survive."
-There are many ways to do it, Pedro.
- Are you going to call the police?
"Would it do any good? Aren't you with me, officer? You told me that you never stop being what you once were. Doctors, for example, are always doctors, anytime, anywhere. And a mind that has become accustomed to suspecting, always does. And it's very easy for it to employ the same tactics as those it suspects. Like doctors, for example, who can kill for the very thing they can cure."
-I wish I had met her sooner, Cecilia.
-But then it wouldn't be you or me, or at least one of us wouldn't be here.
-Keep telling me.
-I'm tired and hungry.
He got up and went to the kitchen. I heard him open the refrigerator, open jars, cut something, and uncork a bottle of wine that Bernardo kept for when he came over.
He brought everything and placed it on the dining room table. He helped me up and into the chair, setting the crutch aside. He chewed the sandwiches slowly, the scar moving like a worm attached to his skull.
- Who was "the skinny one"? - I asked him.
His name was Norberto; I never knew his last name. We called him Beto, or "Skinny," as he liked to be called. He came between Raúl and me over the land and a bunch of other things my brother and I had unresolved. We were very different. I resembled my father in my sour and withdrawn nature, but

he never killed anyone; he only burned land and condemned his family to poverty. Raúl resembled him physically, but he was intelligent and thoughtful. Skinny sowed discord, and that's how I somehow learned what he was really like.

- What was it like?

One in the morning. The garbage truck drove by, making its usual clanging of metal and plastic. Then, the siren of an ambulance.

"Death, Cecilia, or a messenger, maybe. You don't know, but we had a sister, and Raúl was responsible for her being burned alive. She was left a living death. The skinny guy took care of Raúl, then, and I was his instrument. He used me, in a way. When I ran into the skinny guy on the road as I was escaping that morning, he picked me up in his car, and I didn't recognize him because he was always so similar to himself that I dismissed any possibility that it was the same person, you know? It's like when we see what we're looking for right in front of our eyes, and we don't recognize it. It's like a loss of memory, and only when I was shot did I begin to understand. Feeling it in another, more concrete aspect of my memories, I understood the way the skinny guy acted."

Pedro now looked like a madman. Was he pretending again to excuse his deaths?

The skinny guy and I left together. I was going to find María, and you probably know about her. I was going to take her to La Plata and we'd start a new life. The skinny guy was a friend, a buddy. He understood me. We didn't get drunk and we walked past the police stations like newborn babies. We arrived and María greeted us with a pout. She worked at the factory from morning until night, so she got up early. I had started working at the factory because María had recommended me, but it wasn't for me, and I didn't know how long I could stand it. I had problems, so they transferred me to another department. They put me on night watch on a Saturday. I asked the skinny guy to come with me; I had gin and wine, and we'd sleep until the next morning—nothing ever happened anyway. He didn't want to; he said María had asked him to ignore me, that he had to keep his job. On Sunday morning, I went back to the house I had started building brick by brick. I saw them both in bed, the skinny guy thrusting his penis into her while she lay face

down, her head pressed against the pillow by his hands. Then I grabbed the shovel I used to mix cement and started hitting Beto over the head. I smashed it to pieces, leaving nothing but bone fragments and bits of brain on the bed. Maria was dead too; I'd slashed her face with the shovel. I wrapped them in the sheet and put them in the trunk of the car.

- Was that Sunday night?

-I see you've been investigating, Cecilia. Did they see me leave?

-The neighbors said they saw someone thin leaving the house in the middle of the night.

"See what I mean? I hadn't killed the skinny guy, after all, but rather a form of his appearance. His skinny soul was still free, even though I thought I had him in the trunk of the car on the way to La Plata."

- And why was I going there?

"Because a cousin of mine, Clara Palacios, from my mother's side of the family, lived there. Clara had married Rodrigo Casas, a baker who was doing well and getting ahead. They welcomed me into their home, but I left the car a block away. The old Valiant was full of flies, and I needed time to get rid of the bodies. I had dinner with Rodrigo and Clara, and their little girl, who was about eight or nine years old. I was going to start work at the bakery in the morning. Rodrigo went to bed. 'I'll watch the oven,' I told him. The kid who usually did it thanked me and went home. I went to the car, drove it to the sidewalk in front of the bakery, took the bundle out, and put it in the oven. It was 1:30 in the morning. By 4:00, when Rodrigo showed up, there were nothing left but bones. When he opened the door and smelled the steam, he looked at me and said:"

- What did you put in there, you son of a bitch? If you ruined my oven…

I explained it to him. He grabbed his head and leaned on the counter, lamenting over and over. He was my accomplice, I told him, with all the fuss about consequences and disasters. Finally, at six in the morning, he agreed to knead the bread as usual. And at seven-thirty, we took out the first batch, baked over the embers from the bones. The first customer to come in was a man holding a boy's hand, and a dog had stayed on the sidewalk, waiting.

"Good morning, Casas," he said.

Rodrigo, downcast and still bitter, replied:

-Good morning, Colonel.
That was the first time I saw Ángel Ansaldi.
-One kilo from the first batch, as always, Casas. But what's wrong with you today? You have that face.
"Nothing, Colonel," he said, as I placed the loaves on the scales until they reached one kilo. "The usual worries."
-I see, your wife is going to be fine, don't worry. And this one, a new employee?
"Something like that," I said, handing him the bag of bread.
Ansaldi cut a piece and tasted it.
-Something different, isn't it? It looks like bread with pork rinds, my friend.
Casas was sweating, I was waiting.
"I think I've seen it somewhere, friend," he told me.
The boy left when his father signaled him to with a stern shove. As I watched the shy boy play with the dog on the sidewalk, a dog he seemed to love more than his father, the colonel told me:
-His photograph is at the police station, my friend . So far he's gotten away with it very well.
He continued chewing calmly.
-You, Rodrigo, leave us alone, and don't get worked up.
An old woman was banging on the door; Casas put up the closed sign. She left, protesting. He went into the kitchen.
"If he's as good a watchman as he is a baker, he could be useful to me, friend," he told me.
“The skinny one” had known how to trap me.

Does good old Pedro truly believe what he says? Doing everything he did can't be solely a matter of survival; he must have been convinced it was the best he could do given the circumstances. There were no traces of remorse or guilt, just a measured approach befitting what one considers necessary at any given moment, whether it's buying wine for dinner or killing someone. Both are equally essential, regardless of their moral implications.
Was it coldness? I didn't see it that way, only an austerity of feeling and an implacable sense of fatalism. But above all, it was the flexibility of his memory

to mold and reshape itself based on circumstances, always mitigating any act, always exonerating. Pedro's memory was remodeled after each crisis, like a bone that fractures and is anatomically reshaped until only dubious traces of the catastrophe remain. The flexibility of cartilage, perhaps, and the firmness of bone alternated in his mind to the point that it was precisely memory that guided him through life. Without memories there are no remorses; without remorse, guilt is simply a thin cloud that haunts us throughout our lives, white, barely visible, and only sporadically murky when it breaks down into a soft, bothersome, and fleeting drizzle.

Pedro Espinoza's eyes were now looking at me from the sofa, with that cloudiness that was undoubtedly disturbing him.

- Are you going to report me, Cecilia?

- Do you think, Pedro, that if I could have done it, you would have told me everything?

"You think I told you all this because I know you have no proof and that no one would believe you. You say I've been crazy ever since I was shot in the head, and that because I'm friends with Colonel Ansaldi, etc. , etc. But I don't think much about what I do... I just do it."

"It's an interesting rule of life, Pedro. I'd like to be able to apply it, but I think you have to be born that way."

"I wasn't always like this. I loved my father, until I ended up hating him. The beatings, the hunger, the uprooting, the sadness, the shouting, the failures, and the smell of smoke that surrounded us and followed us as if we were angels from hell. That's what my mother and Father Macabeo called us. Poor things, they said, each one will face life as best he can. And I'm the only one still alive, do you realize that? Can I possibly deny that?"

-On the contrary, Pedro. He should be proud.

He looked at me with distrust, rather annoyed and confused, because trust or the lack thereof had no meaning for him.

Are you making fun of me?

"Not at all," I said, shrinking back on the sofa, clutching my remaining leg with my arms, and resting my chin on my knee. He came closer. The smell of grease and gasoline made me give in, I think. The smell of auto repair shops always enveloped me in an aura of strangeness, of unsettling neglect.

-You are very beautiful, Cecilia.
-You should leave, Pedro.
"To leave her alone to call the police? I understand, you're very intelligent, and somehow you might manage to make them believe you. For me, it will be a very uncomfortable time, and I'd like to avoid it."
- So you plan to kill me then?
He smiled in a way that I would have called cynical if I didn't consider his mind too simple to contemplate those almost always useless traits of hypocrisy and sleazy manners.
-The only way I know to break the spirit is by lacerating the flesh.
Could that man conceive of such an idea, such an abstract concept bordering on a deterministic and pessimistic philosophy? Heidegger and Nietzsche in the same man?
He lifted me in his arms. With one hand he supported my body, with the other my leg, and a hand slowly caressed my thigh, moving upward as he carried me to the bedroom. The clock struck three in the morning; at six-thirty the alarm would ring for me to go to the factory. I didn't know if I'd be alive to hear it, and yet I worried about the few hours of sleep I had left. A vain and subtle concern that revealed my contradictory spirit, the ambivalence that could never make me abhor monsters.
He laid me on the bed, took off my clothes, and I contemplated the asymmetry of my body. The scalpel's edge had lacerated me several times, even with the hands of a man who loved me. Now, on that night where the balcony curtains swayed in the street breeze and the flashing lights of the few streetlamps, the intermittent mercury vapor lamps, the half-functioning neon signs, on that night where the high arches of the Abasto market were the backdrop for a painting by an artist sick with sadness, I saw Pedro's shadow, naked as death, smelling of sweat and burnt rubber, of overheated metal and old leather. I heard the creaking of his body, like that of a machine whose joints were being oiled as they recovered, until silence fell and, outside, the engine of the garbage truck rumbled.
I felt his beard against my face, his moist, chapped lips, the scent of cigarettes and wine. His body was an army of metal, a rifle whose blatant obscenity was no less devastating for it. The pride of the strong is like that of

the wise. Security is based on seizing the moment. That's why Pedro acted so quickly and with such precision. He knew I wouldn't resist, that I wouldn't scream or let him hurt me any more than I already was.
The laceration of the flesh consisted of dividing the muscle into its essential components: the flesh and the sinew. Pedro sometimes chose to tear the flesh, which would then succumb to the teeth of dogs or rot in the rain in a garbage dump. Other times, he might choose to sever the sinew, but then the task was more delicate, like that of a vivisector, separating the muscle fibers in search of the essence he was going to lacerate to end life.
And what could I do, if I was my body, if my soul was impregnated with flesh and adhered to it as a means of life?
My body, from the beginning, was my downfall.
On top of me, I felt the weight of night and the darkness of death. One crushed me until I lost my breath, and by the time I recovered it, my spirit was as crippled as my body. The other plunged me into disorientation and led me, like an old, blind dog, through the atrocious circle of despair.

5

Pedro left early; it was still dark. I stayed awake for I don't know how long, in the darkness, listening to the street awakening beneath the balcony. I gazed at the open window as if it were an exit leading me to strange people and places, the commonplace yet unknown to me. There, people, without knowing me, would see my vulnerability and my powerlessness, and without asking questions first or judging afterward, they would help me. Paradise might have been covered in asphalt—who knows? The earth is crueler, sometimes, than the ground built by man. The earth suffocates, but insists on reminding us of life: water, worms, seeds, and back again the cycle that returns us to death. Asphalt doesn't question or consider opportunities, not even thought, which for me is, in itself, a kind of Paradise reclaimed.

But I didn't have the strength to get up or go out onto the balcony. I fell into a deep sleep, something I hadn't experienced in a long time. I woke up after midday, when the phone had already rung many times, intruding on my dreams sometimes like car horns, other times like the drills of municipal workers on the sidewalk. I got up, as best I could, sometimes on all fours, sometimes on three (forgive the errors of habit; the mind takes time to adjust to reality). I got into the bathtub and stayed there for an hour, maybe, thinking about the different ways to kill myself. The warm water turned cold and I got chills, and since they say that cold tempers tempers outbursts of temper as much as the deepest depressions, I suddenly felt hungry. And the phone rang again, like the bell that calls the patients in a psychiatric hospital to meals. The apartment on Sarmiento Street returned to its exhausting reality, but no less soothing for its exhausting nature, like the trivial consolation of the saints. Somewhere in my library, Boethius awaited me, ready to be consulted. Sarmiento Street, near the Abasto market, was a kind of private paradise where the Fall into sin always had its silver lining, because my imponderable Adam wore a white smock when he wasn't naked. Yes, the telephone was ringing from somewhere, and it was surely his fingers that had dialed the number.

I carefully climbed out of the bathtub, stumbling a couple of times. I'd left my crutches in the bedroom. I dried myself sitting on the edge, then put on some cologne Bernardo had left for after shaving. I waddled across the bathroom to the bed, moving my good foot like a caterpillar and using the walls for support. I put on a robe and reached for the phone to make a call, and suddenly it rang.

"Bernie!" I said without hesitation, and my throat filled with anguish.

- Miss Taboada?

It was Cintia, from the company, who had recently been promoted to Aranguren's secretary, and she was celebrating by making that reprimanding call to me.

- Didn't he come today?

Suddenly, my sarcasm resurfaced, and I knew I felt better.

-If he's talking to me on the phone, it's obvious, unless he has a double there and hasn't seen her, Cintia.

Don't try to pull a fast one on me, Cecilia. I want to know why you didn't come to work.
-I have a fever and chills...
"Yes, Pedro already told us early, but I didn't quite understand how he found out so soon. What do you think? Anyway, if you don't want them to dock your pay, bring a doctor's certificate. It won't cost you much; you have plenty of friends, as far as I know. Lame people are having a field day these days."
She didn't even hear the "bitch" I called her; she'd already hung up. I continued insulting her from head to toe as if she were standing right in front of me, punched the pillow as if it were her, and grew weary of so much pointless rage, as always, unless it brought about change. I needed to calm down, and the obligation of taking my daily medication infuriated me because of the absurd insignificance of its effects. So I rummaged through the bedside table drawer. Boxes, capsules and loose pills, insulin vials, syringes and needles, gauze, rubbing alcohol. At the bottom, a little marijuana that no longer had any effect on me, but I needed cocaine. It was new to me; I hadn't been using it for at least a year or so, but although its effects were sometimes contradictory, they tended to rescue me from a state of inner apathy. Outwardly, I was still a delirious rag, laughing and crying sporadically; inwardly, I walked in a sublime ecstasy, trying to salvage the energy I'd lost. It was like a long stay at a gas station, refueling for the journey that awaited me on the open road. When the effects wore off, their echoes lingered, though not as profound as they'd promised to be, and each time they lasted less and less time. That's why my common sense resisted Leonardo's suggestions.
I thought of him, my supplier. He wasn't a bad guy, as Bernardo said; he was a kind of doctor who knew how to manage the dosage of those he sold to, or gave away, as in my case. He wasn't a trafficker; he didn't need that to live. The Gonçalvez family sent him money from Brazil, but it was part of his duty to keep them informed about what was happening around here when he wasn't writing for journalism, an activity with which he had tried to distance himself from the family legacy, only managing to become more deeply involved. Because the more he learned about Latin American politics and society, the idiosyncrasies of the people who comprised it, all that information helped him to foresee, in some way, the next civil uprisings, the imminent

disasters perpetrated from abroad, whether from North America, Europe, or Asia. The Americans, he said, had the invincible power of money; Europe, weapons; the Chinese, conquest through submission. And all that he had learned during his travels and interviews, instead of using it to develop his professional career, he used to benefit his family's business, which was indirectly also mine. He had realized that all the truths he had come to see were contradictory and so complex that they couldn't be unraveled without the entire edifice of the continent collapsing. And the others were already prepared to rebuild it, those who had brought the bombs wrapped in documents bearing the names of contracts, first, and then laws.

Yes, I told myself, drying my tears with the pillow where Pedro had laid his head. I'd call Leonardo, and we'd talk about all of this, and while I was at it, I'd ask him for the injection.

Night fell. Meanwhile, I got dressed and spoke with Bernardo, in whose voice I noticed more concern for his patients than for me, and with Renato, whose voice also betrayed the emptiness my mother's absence created in his conversations. Leonardo arrived, his complexion dark, the color of dark ash.

"What's wrong?" I asked as we sat down on the bed. Her eyes were shining when she looked at me, but they saw something else.

-Excuse me, Ceci, it's just that…

I turned around to look at the wall, white, half dirty, and where there was only the crucifix that had remained since the previous owners had left.

"It must be very valuable," he said. And at first, my impulse was to mock him, but I realized he was speaking bitterly.

"I don't know, it was here when we came with Bernardo. It seemed, I don't know, strange to us, and we also felt a kind of unease about removing it, especially from him, who, despite all his knowledge, is sometimes more superstitious, religiously speaking, than many ignorant people."

-You know that you can't come back from those teachings, just like you can't come back from an amputated limb.

He told me just like that, as if he were cutting off another part of my body. If I cried, he wouldn't care; he was as cruel as the God who had killed his Son, whom he now regarded with a sorrow befitting gods, understandable to men only through the lens of utility. What seems to us hypocrisy or falsehood is

perhaps something deeper than true sorrow, something similarly distant from pain. That is why flesh has been given to us, to experience, in a certain way, the pain of God. Who has said that God is ethereal because he is everywhere? Flesh is everywhere. Who has said that God does not die? Flesh does not die as such, but rather transforms into earth, fire, water, and air. The elements of the periodic table, the few that are known, are what we call flesh. They are the pain that reminds us of life, and death is an eternal remembrance of what has been lost. The flesh is not recovered, only the bone is recovered, the bone upon which it will grow, upon which the untimely and recalcitrant force of boredom will exert itself, the constant demand of the battered, and the eternal bitterness of frustration.

"It's a deformed, twisted Christ," I told Leonardo. "It reminds Bernie of the sick people he has to heal, and me, myself." I laughed. "I'm humble, aren't I?" He didn't answer me, he just kept looking at the crucifix.

-I recognize the style; it's from some Indians from the coast, from Corrientes or Entre Ríos, because it's not very old, but it's made with details that these Indians have had since they came from Brazil.

- And why do you have that face, Leonardo?

"I'm only seeing the Christ now, I hadn't seen it before. Has it always been hanging there?"

-Yes, always.

- And how come I didn't see it before?

Lost in thought, she went to the kitchen, brought two glasses, and poured the beer she had brought. She looked at me, and in her eyes there was a glimmer of discovery.

"It's this damned family of ours that instills these feelings. What for others are mere daydreams become obsessions for us. The doctor probably told you that spontaneity doesn't exist, that everything is the result of a long process. Daydreams, like feelings, are nothing more than dust, so to speak, because even forming the substance of dust takes thousands of years. But reality as we know it is the product of a multitude of processes and transformations, which also involve its own deaths and resurrections."

-But you 're not Catholic.

"Don't be naive, Ceci. Catholicism as a doctrine is a jumble of legends and myths taken from all over the place. The only enviable thing about priests is, or was, their dedication to reading, and the almost sublime imagination with which they created their specters."
"Ghosts are scary," I said.
-That's where the power comes from, Cecilia.
- And what does this have to do with the expression on your face?
He rubbed his two- or three-day beard, and seemed to clear up.
-I've known you for a few years, and during that time I didn't really see what was happening to you. But today, seeing you like this, I mean after the surgery, when all the planning was complete.
- The final architecture of my body?
-If that's what you want to call it, or the final construction with which they bury us.
He looked at me, distressed again.
-We Gonçalvez aren't just garbage collectors, as some of your friends like to call us, nor are we just gravediggers. We only come when we know the broth is ready.
I burst out laughing at that expression, which shattered the solemnity. But I suddenly gave in when I thought of the pus that constantly oozed out before the amputation, the breeding ground where the germs had bred. Someone, a minor god, like the doctors, had come to claim my dead leg. How long would it be before the rest?
-This all seems like the delusion of an addict.
-I know why you called me.
And he began to prepare the syringe.

I immersed myself in what he called daydreams, useless in the construction of reality, mere links in eloquent silences in music, passages in the half-sleep of siestas or mornings. I barely felt the pricks anymore after so many, so very many, in the hospitals, not to give me substances that could offer me paradise, but to drain a little more of the blood my body had already paid for, or to give me a drug that, rather than relieving the pain, usually plunged me

into a state where there was a rudimentary awareness of incipient pain, like a slug conscious of the threat of the scalpel.

He began to tell me about his life. Leonardo had been born in Bom Jesus, a small town in southern Brazil, not too far from the border with Misiones. A town of impoverished ranches and shacks built along the roads bulldozed through the jungle not many years before. Mostly poor people, Black and mulatto, others white-skinned but with Black ancestry, their behavior bearing the marks of slavery that are difficult to erase, especially when the world around them follows the same patterns as centuries before; the landscape often changes more than customs. Where there were once trees, there are now usually roads. Where there was prejudice, there is now often dogma. That's why people like him and his family, lacking the formal education they heard about on the radio when they went to the village store or in the trucks of those who went to sell hides and meat, or from the Argentinians or Paraguayans who looked at them with pity while smoking, asking if there were schools in the village. There was none of that, only mangy dogs that taught them how to survive on old bones and rainwater in the mud, women who went back and forth from the stream to the house with buckets and clothes, and shovels to cultivate meager vegetables, and men, many men, mostly silent, but with mouths full of spit and fervent drinkers of aguardiente, when there was any; otherwise, there was denatured alcohol, which the women knew how to prepare with chicha and other concoctions. The women had the knowledge for everything; the men had the bodies that endured almost everything. The work in the fields, when the floods occasionally allowed, the annual weeding and pest control , if a tree trunk, a snake, or a swamp didn't get them there first. And of course, shotguns often came into play.

I saw all of that while Leonardo spoke, in his little boy's voice, the voice of a nine- or ten-year-old boy, naked and barefoot, splashing through the mud among the shacks, followed by the tall, skinny dog that was the only one capable of getting its paws in the mud and pulling them out, until one day it got stuck there and died. Leonardo would then slip through an opening without a door and enter a room with corrugated iron walls and roof. On the table were plates, bottles, and a saucepan with a ladle. He would sit down,

help himself to whatever was there, and eat quickly and eagerly, watching to see if his father, whose head was resting on his crossed arms on the table, would wake up from his drunken stupor. Two things could happen: he might glare at him and slap him hard, or he might stick his head in the saucepan and hit him with the ladle, laughing. Whether it was fury or amusement, Leonardo was never sure which his father preferred. The problem was that his mother rarely saved him from the fun, as she listened and watched everything from her spot by the wood-fired oven. She only intervened when his father slapped him until he fainted. Then she would approach and place a hand on his back, and he would suddenly stop, bewildered, as if he had been burned with ice—burns that only ached the next day when he worked in the sun. And everyone, seeing his bare back, would laugh or cross themselves, because the woman had marked him once again. How many more lives did he have to die? they would ask each other, because they didn't dare ask him.
I asked, my head on the pillow, my voice nasal and eyes closed, surrounded by jungle and thorns, by dogs that watched me, sitting, lying down, picking lice or licking their mange, observing me, waiting for food. I asked, I say, how many lives she had left. Leonardo answered, as many as she wanted.
"My mother loved the old man. She'd had other men before, but none of them gave her a son. The man who was my father was named Eleuterio Gonçalvez, and he was good for nothing but fathering me. That's what she told me when she was treating the bruises he'd given me, because the times he'd touched her, he'd learned the hard way not to do it again. I asked my mother if I could learn to do the same, but she told me that to do that you had to be a woman. 'Your testicles,' she said, 'are like two brains that neutralize each other. Too much dick and not enough brains are only good for procreating, and then back to the earth.' My mother was a Gonçalvez too, I don't know from which village. They're the ones who run everything; the men are the gatherers, the ones who go from one place to another as they designate. That's why my father had those scars on his back." Each one was enough to throw away whenever she wanted, but each new brand abolished the previous one, and what she thought was a sentence gradually became a pardon. My mother died one day. I was already grown, and an Argentinian teacher, a effeminate guy who tried to get me into bed several times, nevertheless took me to a school

in Misiones and then to the university. Did I sleep with him, you want to know? Yes, of course, what difference does a man or a woman make if the lust is the same? The teacher was good and knew a lot of things. What he couldn't do was remove the stains, which were really cancers, of superstition. How could I explain it to him, or rather, make him understand? But what he couldn't understand, he let slip by, like Heraclitus's river. One day we're together, the next, bye, kid, he'd say to me with that Buenos Aires accent. Márquez, his name was. As I was saying, one day my mother died the way she was meant to die, amidst the prayers and rituals of the Gonçalvez family in our poor village. No frills, just a few marks left after she'd been shaved, marks that served as a map so she wouldn't lose her way to death. She could get lost; it had happened to many, and that's why they wandered around, bothering the living. My father stood there, to one side of the door, thin as ever, his bones and tendons marked by work, smoking and spitting. Everyone stared at him, waiting for him to drop dead at any moment, with all those marks on his back, marks she hadn't made in a long time because I was grown now and hadn't laid a hand on me again. I stood behind him, waiting for the wake to end. The midday light illuminated his dark back, the white marks that were so noticeable, and which grew darker with each passing year. But the sign didn't come to pass. One after another, they canceled out the previous one. But the last one, I wondered? Although I'd always wanted to ask the old woman, I never dared. When does one die, I asked myself so many times? Not because I hated it, Ceci. I neither hated nor loved it; it was simply clinging to the only source of security I'd learned in that half-finished civilization, as old and ancient as the first inhabitants of the Amazon. None of the things they've taught us in schools or universities—you, me, and everyone we know—have the slightest guarantee of lasting: money? I don't give a damn about money; health? It's a utopia; culture? The most unstable thing ever invented; sex? The most insignificant and overrated thing; love? A rusty nail in the brain. The only certainty in that shack, as in so many others, was the concreteness of the pronouncements, the reality of what was marked. But my father hadn't died, even though the last mark remained white, like an inverted crescent moon. So was nothing I knew true? Was it all a lie, as my teacher had said? I placed a hand on my father's back, and he startled, just like when

she did it. The old women raised their heads from their prayers when they heard him. He looked at me fearfully, and then he hugged me. It was the only time we were together in our lives. We were tall, we were Black men, we were strong. The next day we buried my father as well. I knew then that he hadn't died sooner because my mother had decided it was up to me to condemn him. She had been something like the judge, I the executioner.
"And that bothered you?" I asked, standing before the grave of old Eleuterio, barely dug in the mud, soon to be ransacked by hungry dogs.
-Of course, because it made me regret the loss of the one who hit me, and end up hating the one I loved.
- It's not nice to be turned into an executioner, is it? To what extent are we responsible for what we do?
Shouldn't you ask yourself from what point? When the others finish, we begin.
I knelt on the ground before the grave. There were no women, except for me, but I was nothing more than a presence from the future, an intruder who was never there, a figment of the imagination heightened by drugs. The dogs, however, were watching me.
-Nobody went to the old man's funeral…
-Nobody, Ceci, I dug the grave as best I could.
- And whose dogs were they?
- What dogs? I didn't see any.

I slept all afternoon in a dream filled with jungles, water, and overcast skies. I could hear the river flowing incessantly. I know I wet myself; I smelled it, and it mingled with my dream as if I were submerged in foul-smelling puddles I couldn't escape. I had legs to get up, but all around me were the dogs. They were all thin and hairless, sick and hungry. They didn't growl or threaten me, but they all stood there, waiting impatiently. They didn't wag their tails; they tucked them between their legs, and if they hadn't been hairless, perhaps I would have seen their bristling backs. They were waiting for me, but they were afraid of me. How much longer would they wait before coming to get me?
I woke up with a jerk in my arm and heard Leonardo and Bernardo's angry voices, arguing furiously, hurling insults at each other in a way that started to

make me laugh. I was in the phase where the drug excited me after I'd calmed down for a few hours. I heard Bernardo accusing him of being a hiccuping, whore-like murderer, a criminal who was killing me for money. None of it was true, but I couldn't speak because my tongue was stuck, as if contracted; the same thing was happening to the muscles in my arms and leg. Leonardo only answered with grunts that sounded like protests in Portuguese. They both took off my clothes, soaked with urine and feces, then the sheets. Bernardo was saying something like:

- Leave it , leave it , I'll take care of it, you've done enough already, you son of a bitch, if he survives this the least I'm going to do is smash that shitty black face of yours !

He was the one who picked me up and carried me to the bathroom, while I laughed with my eyes wide open because I couldn't close them, and with my arms and fingers outstretched as if I wanted to point at them both, or hug them. But they didn't understand me.

Bernardo put me under the shower.

- Call an ambulance!

"I can't," Leonardo replied from the bathroom doorway.

-I already imagined it, you 're afraid of the police, but you're going to be even more afraid of me.

Bernardo's voice broke, and he wept with his face pressed against my wet head.

- Didn't you notice, you piece of shit, all the medicine he's taking? Didn't you see the boxes of medicine?

Leonardo was almost white, and that was already a lot to represent his fear.

-There is a way, doc. I've seen it many times, you have to believe me.

-I know, and all those times you got away like the piece of shit you are , hiding in the pipes like a turd that even dogs don't want to smell.

I couldn't help but laugh; my vocal cords had loosened, and I was laughing, my lungs filled with air, but suddenly the air emptied them, and nothing could get in. When they realized I was choking, Bernardo said he was going to perform a tracheotomy. He had left his briefcase in the car, he said. His hands were trembling. Suddenly, Leonardo grabbed his hands and said:

-Doc, trust me, there's no more time.

Bernie's face still held the love he once had for me. I longed to caress him, but my hands were as hard as stakes.
Leonardo then lifted me slightly, resting the back of my neck on the edge of the bathtub, and pulled a dark green slurry from his mouth that he'd been chewing all afternoon while telling me about his parents. Bernie made one last attempt to stop him, but gave in. I felt like my eyes were going to explode because I couldn't close them, and the slurry was sticking to the roof of my mouth, further clogging my throat. I waited for the dogs to come closer. They were in the bathroom, and many more were surely in the bedroom and in the hallway outside the door. And those waiting on the sidewalk, perhaps. One of them was sitting next to Bernardo, and I saw him stroking its head while still watching Leonardo and me.
Then it all ended. The wind came with the scent of fresh mint, and it carried away men and dogs. And I was left alone in the bathtub, breathing, at last, the scent of musk.

I woke up again in bed. I looked at the clock on the nightstand; it was three in the morning. I threw the clock to the floor without realizing my arms were free. Bernardo woke up in the chair where he had been sleeping. Leonardo was on the other side, awake, and smiling at me.
"What did you give me?" I asked. "It tasted like musk."
-That was it, with other herbs, but mainly musk.
"It's an aphrodisiac," I said without thinking.
Bernardo, who had grown up in the countryside, who had heard so much of that stuff, that even his father accepted it when he couldn't solve the riddles of science any other way, got angry again. Without a word, he stood up and punched Leonardo. Leonardo defended himself, and they grappled, throwing themselves to the floor, kicking each other, and hitting each other's ribs. I sat on the bed, grabbed a crutch, and started hitting them, whoever they were.
"Is that enough, boys? You got your fill of fighting over a woman. Is this a relic of the old days of gentlemen? It would reflect better on you if it were a pistol duel with witnesses and surgeons on hand, not like two ill-tempered brawlers. But you both come from the countryside, what can you do? One with so much science learned from books, the other with so much social

philosophy from university lectures, and you end up on the ground writhing in ignorance. They say she's beautiful, voluptuous, simple-minded and gullible, obedient and submissive to the slightest command. That's why men like her; with her, you don't need to think."
I was obviously in the verbosity phase, the last vestiges of the overdose. They had both stopped and were looking at me.
They're like two fighting roosters. The doctor and the journalist arguing over a dying woman. They're laughable, can't you see? I just can't stop...

Bernardo gave me a sedative. In the morning, Leonardo was gone, as was the scent of musk. I smelled coffee coming from the kitchen.
-Bernie, is that you?
"And who else is it going to be?" his tired voice answered. Resignation was his trademark, and it had marked him for life.
When he brought the coffee on a tray, with warm croissants he had gone to buy at the bakery on the corner, I said to him:
-Nothing forces you to keep putting up with me.
He lay down on the bed, like in the old days; he'd showered and was wearing only his underwear. He brushed my face with the back of his hand.
"Do you still love me ?" I asked him, referring to that whole romantic scene of jealousy last night.
- What do you remember ?
-Of everything.
- And that you almost died?
-That, above all.
- And what about the fact that it wasn't me who saved you, but that black guy?
-Don't be disrespectful.
"I'm not, believe me . Calling him 'black' is as true as the fact that he knew how to do what I didn't. With me, you would have died. You know what they say in the countryside? I know about these things too; not everything is about technology these days. If someone saves your life, you're tied to that person forever, and if they're an aphrodisiac like the one he gave you, you won't think about anything else. Even if it wasn't his initial intention, Ceci, it was his hidden wisdom."

-It's jealousy, Bernie.
-Yes, it's jealousy. But I know men a thing or two.
He gave me a croissant to bite into, he bit into the other half. He kissed me. I didn't tell him about Pedro. The smells had disappeared with the wind, along with the black man and the dogs that had accompanied him.
He caressed my entire body, which he knew so well. The hands of a surgeon and the hands of a lover sometimes resemble each other. Men knew my body so well that it sometimes drove me to despair. But other times, like now, it delighted me.
One came to clean up the other's mess.

6

Although I could have returned to work sooner, Bernardo wanted me to wait at least two weeks. He didn't ask me why Dora and Pedro had come back. Renato then took it upon himself to come and help me with some things around the house, or simply to keep me company. He promised, one day while we were talking on the phone, not to interfere in my life, to always call before coming, and not to pressure me. He recognized in me my mother's stubbornness, a virtue more than a vice when it came to her, although I'm not sure it applied to me. My obstinacy was almost always motivated, if not by ignorance or helplessness, then by insecurity.
My lack of friends is peculiar, the kind that any average woman tends to have, even if it's just for sharing confidences that don't actually solve anything and only create a semblance of companionship. But it usually satisfies the needs of those who believe it's unwise to leave someone sick with their own thoughts. After so much dealing with me and my temperament, Bernardo had found in this a kind of lifeline for his own peace of mind. But it was difficult to fight against my habit of solitude, the comfortable isolation in my own sanctuary, my own labyrinth, of thoughts that fed on themselves. I admit it, that was the

curious and the unhealthy part. As the years went by, my own mind became a bird of prey, and what's worse, it became self-destructive , like my body.
I have no female friends, I don't trust women, and I believe the only ones worth associating with are those with whom you don't need to talk much to communicate. And the brutal thing about my moral compass is that my relationship with men isn't friendly, but crucially hurtful. I'm the one who offers them, and sometimes even forces them to accept, the instrument to hurt me.
I looked at myself in the mirror before leaving for work. I was thin and had a slight blush that made freckles stand out, freckles that hadn't been visible on my cheeks for a long time. The sun during those few days of afternoon naps on the balcony had caused them.
I handed Cintia the medical certificate; she glanced at it without reading it, her eyes fixed on a point on the paper, probably mulling over some sarcasm.
-I hope you enjoyed your vacation, Cecilia. The pending files are at the office.
It was true. The desk was piled high with cardboard boxes of complaint letters. I wasn't scared; I felt like this was my favorite place, the entrance to a world teeming with men and women overwhelmed by numbers and laws they couldn't decipher. A cadet came in to add another box. He looked at me with an apologetic smile.
"Where should I leave you, miss?" he said, looking around for an empty space.
-On the floor, and what's your name ? You're new, right?
-Andrés Giraldo, miss.
It's Cintia's last name, I thought, a spy has already planted one on me.
-Thank you.
-If you need me, just whistle.
He seemed to have the sincerity of a confused teenager, but I'd better not trust him.
I got to work. I felt it was necessary to start catching up on the latest issues; the pending letters were already sick from time and waiting, and a few more days wouldn't change the diagnosis. All morning I quickly read the complaints, which were short and direct, easy to identify by the formal envelopes of some companies, others simple ones from family homes, but all containing a single sheet of paper with terse handwriting and direct

language. They weren't my favorites, but they were a kind of alternative therapy to get me back into the swing of things. I answered them quickly on the typewriter, repeating the usual formula for such bureaucratic procedures, promising the prompt resolution of the problem. Then, around two in the afternoon, with a half-eaten ham and cheese sandwich on a plate next to the typewriter, I put thirty-five replies in envelopes and started writing the return address. Frigidaire Companies, SARL. Then I realized something I hadn't noticed before. When I signed each reply, I put the director's name: Arnaldo A. Aranguren. He didn't sign them personally, of course, only those involving a serious conflict or addressed to someone of importance. There was a stamp with his signature, which easily resembled his signature in bright blue ink. I would stamp it, fold the paper, and seal the envelope, stacking them in a filing cabinet that the messenger would come to collect before the post office closed.

The three A's in the director's name caught my attention. I was letting my suspicious and eccentric imagination run wild, the one that liked to see the seeds of a conspiracy in everything. But the surrounding factors didn't help me avoid it. Mr. Aranguren's political background, clearly demonstrated by my first interview with him; the company's economic survival during those crucial times—I would say disastrously turbulent for any undertaking or development—and his obvious connections to military circles, from which he received the necessary support. But was this support meant to sustain a company that employed hundreds of people and helped keep national industry afloat? The spare parts for repairs came from abroad; I saw the business correspondence, and many of the complaints that came my way weren't from consumers, but from companies and businesses with names that seemed fictitious to me. Men and companies from places I'd never heard of, with postal codes I'd never found in postal directories or the Entel Yellow Pages. I simply copied the numbers written on the return addresses, answered in a standardized way , and put the envelopes in the envelopes.

Linking the director to the Triple A simply because of the coincidence of his initials was absurd, of course. But my mother had warned me many times: that organization was full of all sorts. Under the guise of fighting the left and Peronism, a wide variety of political and criminal orientations were

concealed. There were right-wingers, Peronists, military chaplains, too, and everything served to carry out denunciations, exterminate opponents, and overthrow governments. But all of that was what was known; what couldn't be proven was sometimes so close to what are usually called conspiracies, black market dealings, and international intrigues that it was quickly underestimated by the official press, which was always very effective at convincing the people. A people increasingly sick with stupidity due to ignorance and drugs, whatever their nature. Because not only alcohol or marijuana and all the others of greater or lesser intensity, but also the habits of hunger and poverty are drugs that produce dependency. The absence of education is a void created by the mass makers: black holes where the heaviest forces of degradation are drawn. What kind of government will develop the growing economy? Utopia persists because it is utopia. Will social justice follow such development? There have always been poor people, but their numbers are growing at an astonishing rate, just as there have always been ignorant people, and their numbers are multiplying alarmingly. A teacher who knows half of what they should know is a criminal, my mother used to say. That's the standard, the yardstick by which to measure everyone else. Whoever has a gun in their hands should have the goodness of a god. I don't understand, I told her when I was little, when she told me that while she was mending clothes and listening to a speech on television.

"Ceci," she said to me then. "Between two evils, one greater and one lesser, which would you choose?" "The lesser," I answered. "And why?" "Because it will do the least harm." "And who forced you to choose an evil, Ceci, whether greater or lesser?" "No one," I said, "you asked me." Then she rebuked me: "I see that I also made a mistake in raising you. An educated citizen chooses the right government; if they err, it won't be solely their fault, and their conscience will be more or less clear. Education isn't about choosing between options, but about choosing the best. Conformity is mediocrity, mediocracy, so to speak. Democracy is the government of the people, Ceci, not the government of ignorance. Behind it lie interests. Power, or whatever you want to call it—sometimes those names are fictions for people's fanciful imaginations, because imagination doesn't do harm, my dear, but intelligence applied to that imagination does. And intelligent people aren't ignorant."

Aristocracy isn't oligarchy, but its misuse; the aristocracy of power should be the aristocracy of the common good. Education isn't singular, but rather the multiplicity of human thought. Incomprehensible, it's true. But people, I replied, when she fell silent, staring at the television screen, sucking the blood from the finger she'd pricked with the needle, can't agree. And that's your excuse for doing nothing, Ceci? Death can't be avoided either, and yet we live as if we were eternal. Utopias exist when someone undertakes them. My mother, so practical, had undergone that philosophical transformation that many old-school activists, those with deep convictions, often experience. Reality has gnawed at them relentlessly and irreversibly, stripping away their protective shell and leaving them naked, exposing the skeleton of their utopia —the only thing that persists, sometimes, if preserved in a museum with the right environment and temperature, dusted off from time to time. But many have gone to great lengths to bury it, and we all know what happens. From the bones of utopia, the worms of ignominy are born.

That afternoon and the following days, I dedicated myself to going through the old files, but above all, I was determined to get rid of the massive tomes and stacks of papers that had accumulated during my absence. Cintia had had them brought in to make my life miserable, and she was using her fifteen-year-old son to keep bringing out boxes and old files, some even from my predecessor in the office. When I saw the dates already half-erased on the boxes, I wondered about the absurd logic of her actions. Didn't she already know I would discard them as soon as I looked at the inscription? But her goal was to waste my time, of course. I kept the boxes that, according to a memo from management, I had to review in light of old legal disputes that had n't yet expired. The lawyers' formalism bored me, but when I stopped worrying about every word and realized that behind so much rhetoric there was nothing more than the mere superficiality of customs, I discarded the old claims as if I had done nothing else in my entire life.
I think it was about a month later, when the boxes had already disappeared after being cataloged and resealed, and the messenger had come to collect them, just as he had brought them, I found a medium-sized one, elongated like the ones cookies come in before being displayed on supermarket shelves.

It was a box of *La Traviata ,* if I'm not mistaken. It had no labels or date, and it was moldy. It looked different from the others, and I told myself that perhaps Andrés had piled it up with the others, thinking only of obeying his mother's request. She had surely told him (I could hear her voice in falsetto, trying to feign intrigue, or perhaps threatening the boy, who, after all, was only of average intelligence), " *Take everything you find, dear, to Miss Cecilia; she likes papers* ." Of course, I could hear her sarcasm and that double meaning the boy wouldn't understand. And he was the one who betrayed her. But I won't get ahead of myself. I'll follow the steps of all those days because the plot requires care and deliberation. The clues are confusing, and the web is woven in a way that resembles a tangled mess.

I opened that cookie tin where there were only letters, all written in the same handwriting. A man's handwriting. The envelopes had an international address: England, but the stamp was from the post office a few blocks from the company in Buenos Aires. The return address read: Adrián Giraldo, the neighborhood: Constitución, almost across from the train tracks. I thought for a while, and remembered the times Bernardo had told me about that place. The patients at Borda, he would say, are good for me; they are, with their madness, an oasis of contradiction that keeps me awake from the routine that plunges me into the lucid madness of anguish, to shake me up and rescue me, allowing me to settle again in the tranquility of stability: that sham of security without which we would all end up committing suicide. The last time he told me that, I looked at him in astonishment at such an allegorical discourse, because I didn't dare call it poetic, wondering when I would hear from him again that permission that had allowed his thoughts to flow. Nothing but eloquent silence marked the rest of our life together.

I started reading the letters one Friday at five in the afternoon. The noises from the workshops had already died away, and only the opening and closing of doors, sending the office staff and workers out into the streets, remained. Every now and then, I heard the whistle of a siren, more traditional than official in those times, and the voice of a radio coming from a car parked by the curb, waiting for one of the secretaries. It was a speech, and I looked up from the letter I had just opened. López Rega's voice alternated with the shouts of the crowd in Plaza de Mayo, and then Isabel Perón's voice, trivial,

redundant, sentimental, mimicking the memory of the General who had died not long before. Her voice shaped her body and her dress as she appeared on the balcony of the Casa Rosada.

I didn't understand what she was saying; a woman's voice has to work hard to be heard. Most people see the woman, not the message, Mom used to say. Female leadership is no different from male chauvinism except in the grammar of gender. And that background noise was the intermittent soundtrack to the letter's voice. A man, Adrián Giraldo, was talking about his routine life with his wife, Cintia, about their fights and mutual misunderstandings. Who are the letters addressed to? A lover living in London? An Argentinian expatriate? It didn't seem that way to me. The recipient sounds impersonal, more like an institution than a specific person. The tone of the letters becomes more intimate and personal as the months go by. At times, I can even see him crying, and my own hands tremble as I hold the paper, as if this man were transmitting his anxiety to me as he writes, which is how I read. The recent past intruded with overwhelming ease, and I barely noticed when the light from the window had disappeared. I turned on the overhead light and continued reading. A knock on the door interrupted me. It was the night watchman.

- Are you still here, miss?

"I'm catching up," I said, pointing to the now-usual jumble of folders.

-Let me know when you leave, so I can close up.

"Don't worry." The old man, however, didn't leave. He pointed behind him with his thumb.

-Yes, I know, Pedro is keeping watch.

He nodded silently and closed the door.

Pedro had avoided running into me in the hallways; we'd only cross paths in the dining room or the entrance, with a look that was like a shield. Neither cold nor angry, but explicitly threatening.

The letters kept coming, and I couldn't stop opening one after another. There were fifty, maybe seventy-eight letters when I finished counting, anticipating the exquisite pleasure of the plot, which took me several days to complete. Arguments with Cintia, then the desolation of her abandonment, and then the most pathetic period began: the daydream. Because this man thought an

institution in England was calling him to offer him a kind of utopia: life on an English prairie, with eternal and improbable green pastures, low rocks plunging into the nearby sea beneath a blue sky dotted with clouds as white as sheep in a Turner landscape. The bucolic dream was too beautiful to be true, but it was precisely in the power of that beauty that the verisimilitude Adrián Giraldo attributed to it rested. And as time went on, the need became imperious, like an addiction. He dreamed of the English countryside, and he learned to translate the letters to which his own were replies. Where were those letters? I looked for them in the same box and in the others that had been left in the office, but I couldn't find them. It was nine o'clock at night when I fell asleep, and I woke up startled by a knock at the door. Pedro was peeking in, asking:

-Cecilia, shall I take you home?

I saw his face in the darkness. The night watchman had cut the power, like every weekend. Pedro's face was the same as that night in my bed.

"Cecilia?" he said.

"I'm leaving in five minutes," I replied.

I waited until she closed the door. I put the letters away and hid the box under others. Pedro waited in the darkness of the hallway.

-Dad Renato is coming to pick me up.

Silently, he went toward the workshops. I don't know what he was doing at that hour, and although he always stayed late, I was only just now wondering. He was checking the status of the repairs, the cleanliness of the workshops, or the day's work stoppages. Perhaps he was meticulously memorizing the mistakes not to correct them, but to suppress them. He was one of those men who know that nothing can be avoided, and that hiding something is the only way to do so. As he left, I heard the doors of the old refrigerators open. Pedro was exploring the machines, or checking things, or perhaps searching? What can you store in disused refrigerators that don't work?

At the bus stop, just before ten o'clock at night, as the bus's headlights approached along the cobblestones of Cabezón Street, I heard the sound of engines—not the factory machinery, but the suffocating hum of the refrigerators. The bus's engine masked it, just as the smell of diesel fuel masked the stench of the gas used to charge the refrigeration units. I sat

down in the nearly empty bus, looking back as I drove away. Pedro's eyes were probably watching what was happening on the sidewalk, confirming the lie about who would come to pick me up. He wouldn't care, really, because all he needed was to be alone in the workshops. I imagined him amidst all those refrigeration machines, like the ice cream emperor in Wallace Stevens' poem, surrounded by children's shouts.

During the following week, I continued reading the rest of the letters in the afternoons, when all the hustle and bustle and the constant surveillance had subsided. Cadet Andrés came and went almost always with a respectful "*Good morning"* and *"Good afternoon, miss* ," even though our age difference was no more than ten years. On Friday, when the administrative staff usually left early, I sat in the chair facing the window, ready to finish the last bundle of letters, carefully tied by date. Before putting on my glasses, I poured myself a cup of coffee and looked out at the street. Cintia was coming out, but she stopped on the sidewalk, and the boy came out too. She fixed his hair and put a hand on his shoulder, then roughly squeezed his cheek and gave him a warning with a wave of her hand. She hurried down the sidewalk, her black purse with silver buckles, wearing a short dress that revealed her legs and accentuated her ample backside in relation to her small bust, and got into a Falcon that was waiting for her on the corner. They always went together with the boy to catch the bus. Today, however, she was in a hurry and had left him alone.
I would definitely take advantage of that opportunity to talk to Andrés.
It was three in the afternoon. By four, I had finished the unfinished letters, because the last one wasn't even signed, as if Adrián Giraldo couldn't sign it because he wasn't there anymore, writing, holding a pen. Everything he mentioned and said in that last letter sounded as volatile and ethereal as the English countryside landscape he had been describing, a landscape whose construction had been prompted by the suggestions of the nonexistent letters from England. Where was Giraldo? What had become of him, if he was still alive? Was he in London, perhaps, and all my worry was nothing more than unfounded conjecture? The two Cintias were reduced to one, the one I knew; that was perhaps why the letters had been in the offices since they were

written. But had she kept and hidden them for sentimental reasons? I doubted it. Knowing her even a little, she would have destroyed them.
I started checking the postage stamps. They were all addressed to an address in London, a non-profit organization (as Giraldo explained) called *Arbitrary. Knowdedge .* I searched several phone directory sites, but found no references. The sender varied; sometimes it was from a private address in La Boca, other times from Constitución, and I could be sure it was from the Borda Hospital. The destination postage stamps were always from the branch a few blocks from the factory. As if some postal worker collected them as they arrived, separated them, and sent them directly to the company. Adrián Giraldo wrote to London according to his conscious delusion or whatever his psychosis led him to imagine. As he wrote and as time passed, his body seemed to deteriorate at the expense of the growth of his spirit. When I speak of spirit, I do so knowing the multiple and arbitrary definitions of the term: psyche, soul, or whatever one wants to call it. The point was that his physical body seemed to be losing consistency, as if becoming transparent. His obsession with the English countryside was so crystal clear and logical that it lost its obsessive connotations, becoming what we call a dream or life ideal. Had he been brainwashed into being swindled? That's what I initially imagined. There were one or more people in the company responsible for such a fraud, which certainly didn't target Adrián alone. They would choose the easy targets, of course. If Giraldo had been in his right mind, he would have discarded the letters, or simply taken a plane in economy class to visit the country of his dreams. But who was Adrián Giraldo?
Since I had access to the company's old files, I searched through the personnel folders of anyone who had ever worked there. There was no one with that name. Except for Cintia Aranguren, whose last name was the same as the boss's, which is why she worked at the factory, even though I didn't know they were related, and Giraldo, who was married. I was now certain that Cintia was the wife who had left him, exacerbating Adrián's psychosis. And Andrés, the messenger boy, must be his son.
At four-thirty in the afternoon, the engines died down, and the men's voices grew louder in the locker rooms and hallways. Their footsteps, their laughter, their curses reached me like a paradise of everyday, ephemeral reality, free

from danger and any suspicion of ulterior motives. My imagination mocked itself.

There was a knock at the door.

"Miss," said the boy. "If you don't need me, I'll leave."

- Is your mom waiting for you?

-No, miss, she has an appointment with the doctor, I'm going alone.

I wondered which doctor would come to pick up his patient from work in a green Falcon.

- Just stay for half an hour, you have to help me sort these letters.

He knew that what he was going to do was rub salt in the wound, but he was confident that he would further upset the teenager, confuse him in his vulnerability, and make him talk about everything his mother had forbidden him to do.

He approached, and I saw not fear but the exaltation of a long-hidden desire. The opportunity had arrived, I read in his expression. And when he was standing next to my chair by the desk, I could smell his exaltation. There was no need to seduce him with my shapeless body. Sitting there, my legs (my non-legs) weren't visible, and he gazed at me as he always did when he barely peeked through the door or came in leaving the boxes, with that kind of adoration for a being we believe to be ideal. I remembered what Pedro had once told me in the truck about my hair and my eyes. My appearance was murky to my own reflection in the mirror, but for certain men it's an ideal of ethereal beauty. I had the look of an intellectual woman, canonized in the typical images of secretaries and writers, women without superfluities, without forced words, and without makeup to hide what doesn't exist. That kind of infatuation enters through the intellect and intensifies the physical desires of many men, but it requires that the pathways of those intellects be prepared and constructed in a certain way. Men like Adrián Giraldo, for example, who had made England a kind of vast breeding ground for his own body, an immense womb into which he would penetrate until he disappeared, becoming one more element of that land.

I attracted men who were sick in mind and spirit. And Andrés, a man after all, even though he was fifteen years old and his mind was still developing, and his body was still acquiring the definitive forms of adulthood: the hair on his

chest, the broad shoulders, the hands with long, veiny fingers, and the beard that promised to be thick and dark.
The boy smiled at me. I asked him to sit down so I could explain. He skimmed a few words.
"Do you like literature?" I asked him.
-Yes, miss, but...
-But what...
-I don't have many books, my mom doesn't give me money, but with this job I was able to buy one.
- Let's see, which one?
-An American poet, miss, Wallace Stevens.
Coincidence? I laughed at the ghosts that seemed to suddenly announce their presence in the office.
- Wow , that's interesting, I like it a lot too.
His complacency spread throughout the room, reconciling himself with those presences that it occurred to me did not want to announce themselves at reception or by telephone.
-I know English, you know?
- Really? Congratulations. Are you taking a private course?
-No, my mom won't let me, she says there's no money. I learned with dictionaries.
In some of the letters, Adrian mentioned that this was how it had started.
- And why English?
- To read Stevens, miss. The translations confuse me, and it seemed to me that there had to be more to his poems.
Yes, I thought, he meant the emperor of ice cream.
What did the boy know about everything that was happening at the factory? What I sensed was, for him, complete ignorance—if we can call concrete knowledge of the causes and facts "ignorance." What he knew was a product of intuition, perhaps inherited from his father. Inherited psychosis, let's call it that to unify and simplify already unorthodox criteria. What he knew was what his father knew: an ideal state in which they had deposited their minds. But while Adrián was already lost forever, Andrés still kept his anchors at the bottom of the choppy sea of his mind.

Suddenly, she looked up and stared at me in panic. She was holding one of the cards, but her hands were trembling.
-But... where did this come from?
-You brought the box, Andrés.
He grabbed his head and began pacing the office from one wall to the other, lamenting.
"Mom is going to kill me, Mom is going to kill me," he repeated over and over.
-Come here, sit down and calm down . He doesn't need to know, I'm not going to tell him anything.
He looked at me anxiously, as if I were his judge. He sat down, crossing his arms and rocking back and forth.
-He told me to bring him any old files, that you liked that kind of work, he called you...
-Don't stop... what was my name again?
-Bookworm. But I didn't know those letters were there.
She'd probably forgotten where she'd put them, too, I told myself. Since they concerned her personally, the more she tried to hide them, the more they were exposed—that's what usually happens. Had she forgotten them? Probably not, just the exact spot where she'd left them. Perhaps she'd lost track of them herself after so many years amidst so many other boxes and papers. Who goes through old receipts and overdue invoices, purchase orders and bounced checks from years ago?
I separated his arms and grabbed his hands.
" Calm down a little, it's not that big of a deal, here ," I said, offering him paper napkins from my desk. He blew his nose.
-Now tell me. This man who wrote the letters, was he your father?
-I think so. I never knew him, except as a baby, and I don't remember him. Much later, my mother told me that my father was crazy, and that's why he had sent me to live with my uncle Luis in San Telmo. Then, one day he came to get me and we went to the house in La Boca where I was born and where they lived. He told me that my father had died.
- How old were you?
"I think it was five years, according to what she told me, but I only have isolated memories of all that. If I remember Uncle Luis's house, it's because I

went there many times afterward. He was fond of me because I was his only nephew, and his son had died somehow, I don't know how, but I don't remember anything about my father. We never talk about it with Mom because she starts crying."
"Yes, I understand ," I said, to avoid the familiar crocodile tears. Or was I misjudging Cintia?
"Okay, Andrés, don't worry about it. I only told you so you'd be prepared in case she finds out, but I promise I won't say anything to her."
- Should I take them back to the depot? Yes, it's best to do that now since she won't be back until Monday.
I thought of Pedro and his nightly rounds. It was five in the afternoon. The night watchman would arrive first, after six.
-Good idea, Andrés. I'll go with you.
He looked at me, surprised, as if wondering if I was alright. Then he nodded, making the reasoning I expected: if they saw him, they would just ask him, but with me it was work.
I suggested we have a soda first. He went out and came back with two Cokes from the vending machine.
- And your mother never remarried?
-No, but she has a boyfriend.
- Really? That's great! Is that someone from the company?
"No, miss. He's the colonel; he comes to our house very often. Sometimes the three of us go out to eat, in San Telmo."
- Which colonel, Andrés?
-Colonel Ansaldi, miss, who else?
The boy was right, Ansaldi was a key player in this story.

7

At seven o'clock in the evening

(Numbers playing tricks on me. I should ask Leticia about numerology, but I don't think she wants to talk about it. We've barely spoken since she returned to the coast. I've heard they call her crazy, that she lives like a ragamuffin on the beach, that she only talks to the dogs. At first, we wrote to each other, we rarely spoke on the phone. She didn't work and lived off the money her family deposited in the bank, but after she sent me the skull in the mail, I never heard from her again. What skull? A dog's, wrapped in a towel and inside a box sealed with packing tape. I received it one morning at Sarmiento's apartment when Bernardo wasn't there. Can I say I was surprised to find that dry skull when I opened the box? Knowing who it came from, it was more of a feeling of unease that subsided as a sense of pride took hold. That was precisely it. I was the only one to whom she gave a gift she considered one of the most valuable: a bone, the most inseparable element of macroscopic anatomy, and within which she She dug, uncovering the mysteries of destiny. It was the skull she used, the skull of a dog she had found dead on the corner of the Haedo estate, the greyhound shot during the factory protests, picked up by Méndez to take to Leticia and present it to her just like that. "He's dead, Leti," he told her. And she, shortly before her parents' death on the beach, went with them thinking about the dog's skeleton lying among the flowerbeds in the nursery, which she went to every night to clean with the tools she found in the shed. What was she looking for? The void where the dog's soul had been. And no matter how much she peeled back tissue after tissue, muscle after muscle until she found the bone, she found nothing but inert matter surrounded by flies. Then I realized, when I received the skull, that she no longer needed it because she wasn't searching anymore. Had the search ended with the discovery, or had she given up? Neither. Now she was searching in the bodies of men for the substance of the soul, in The living men she saw on the beach or in the sea, the men who laughed like gods, who caressed and kissed their women with their tanned, almost naked bodies, their arms raised, lifting a small child against the sun, as if daring it to take him away, unaware that the world doesn't work in any of the multiple and successive ways we imagine, its strategy always runs one step ahead of us, and fate doesn't attack from where we expect, but from within, the darkness we didn't know was there because it seemed so white, so

austerely innocent as nothingness, and in it the architecture of chance is built, the polyhedra whose combination is infinitesimally disproportionate to all possible imagination, because it is beyond it, infinite as darkness and immense as nothingness. How can we interpret these contradictions with frail human reason? Those who give up fall into the calculation of victims. Leticia, on the other hand, had found, perhaps the formula, the engineering, and what was perhaps only the outline. definitive, with its blatant contradiction, of the ultimate and the ancestral, the circle of the snake that bites itself, and there on the beach, sitting on the sand and contemplating the sea, she saw in the curls of the waves the fingers of God playing with chance)

The night watchman peered through the door, asking the same question as the previous Friday, with the same expression on his face and in his voice, and his body positioned exactly between the door and the frame, like a machine with a built-in clock of fear. It was *déjà vu.* which left me confused for a moment. It was Friday, the same time, but the boy was there to confirm the difference, although the moment the night watchman appeared I thought I felt a turn of the circle, as if the gears of time had suddenly aligned themselves like those pieces that fit together perfectly after you've tried to force them. But which were the puzzle pieces that did so? Can a blind person put together a puzzle?

Andrés Giraldo's face, perpetually sorrowful, was filled with an immense well of anxieties and questions, doubts and assertions that he shattered at every turn. Because that's what he did when he asked me what I thought of his father and mother.

- Do you think my dad was crazy?

"I don't know. Who knows what was really wrong with him? From what I gather, he was at the Borda Psychiatric Hospital for a long or short time, perhaps for longer or shorter periods. Maybe your mother told you he died to finally put an end to his memory. Sometimes people deal with these things that way, when there's no way to make them fit into the rational way we all understand life. But your father, who knows, saw other things in reality, and they were true too. I don't think, like many, that the only things that exist are those perceived by our common senses. The much-praised 'common sense' is

often so mediocre, so cloyingly hypocritical, that sometimes I'd prefer the most brutal tragedy instead."
Andrés was looking at me, but he didn't see me.
- How do you know these things, miss?
- What things?
- Do you see them too?
I was guessing what he meant.
"No, I just have a very rebellious imagination that eats a lot and gets fatter all the time. It must be the compensation my mind creates for my illness. If the body has to abstain, the imagination takes its place."
-It's just that I...sometimes...it's not that I imagine them, I see them, miss.
"This boy is a worthy son of his father," I told myself. I took his trembling hand.
"I'm afraid of my mother, miss. She wants me to join the army. She says the colonel has already assigned me a privileged position, but that first I have to spend a few months as a conscript. She says it's necessary, that it will do me good and strengthen my character."
Did Ansaldi suggest that?
The colonel doesn't talk to me much. He shakes my hand like a man, and addresses me formally when we're in the car.
- Are you giving me a ride? Where to?
He was stunned for a few seconds; those words seemed to have escaped him.
"Well," I said, "he must be trying to get along with you if he wants to marry your mother, I suppose."
-Yes, that must be it.
She looked away and I saw her eyes shining, but she was holding back her tears.
- Do you have a girlfriend, by any chance?
He shrugged. He sighed deeply and buried his face in his hands, resting his elbows on his knees.
It was already night and the only light in the office was the one on the desk.
"Where are you going for a walk?" I asked him.
-Some apartments are on Corrientes, others on Once.
-He takes you out with women, I understand.

The colonel indulged himself in inexpensive places, probably half-camouflaged so that he would not be recognized, and he made sure that those who did so were low-class people, lacking in courage and understanding.
"Let's go, and I'll stay seated in the armchair. A girl takes me to the bedroom, she insists…but I…I immediately see that woman. When I'm on top of her, I tell myself that everything is alright, that I'm a man now, that the colonel and my mother will be proud of me. The girl in bed is going to tell him that I behaved well, that she liked it a lot, but then, when…when…you know…when I'm inside her…I see them torturing that woman."
- What woman, Andrés?
"I don't know!" he shouted, looking at me with the face that must have been his father's, and I was almost convinced that the man who had written the letters was now standing in front of me.
-All I see is them lying her on a table and the men climbing on top of her like dogs, putting things inside her and burning her.
Picanas? Where could he have seen that? Or perhaps he hadn't seen them yet?
He was already a man, undoubtedly, overwhelmed by the presence of the future.
"Come on," I said, "let's take the box back to where you found it."
That thought banished his anxiety, and he became almost an ordinary teenager again.
We walked through corridors I'd never been in before, down two flights of stairs to reach the basement that served as a storage area. It was enormous and seemed to encompass almost the entire factory grounds. Andrés moved around as if he owned the place, turning on the lights as we walked among boxes and the remains of old refrigerators, placing his hand on the wall knobs in the exact spots, sometimes hidden behind rusty, crumbling shelves.
"Is this where the files are kept?" I asked, as I followed him, careful not to trip over his crutches.
-Everything that is useless is stored away.
I saw refrigerators that weren't that old against a wall, and as the lights turned on and off, because he didn't allow for the possibility that the night

watchman would find us, I discovered the long row of appliances that made a low, muffled, running motor hum.
- What are those refrigerators for?
-I don't know, miss, they must be old things, they have a padlock and I don't care.
Yes, he was only interested in the folders and files. I realized this when we arrived at the storage room, where there were piles of boxes, stacked up and damp. There were no labels or signs indicating dates or contents.
- Did you get the box from here?
-I don't remember anymore, I already told you that I grabbed her without looking.
-But you know all this very well, and you've surely read many files, Andrés.
He acknowledged it, shrugging his shoulders. That boy knew far more than he was letting on, and even though he tried to hide it, the colonel had noticed and was grooming him to join his ranks, either to silence him or to make him a convert, though the latter seemed unlikely to me. If the boy had it in his head, as I suspected, that his father's legacy would end the same way, one way or another.
Why did he pick up that box? The letters were open, but showed no signs of having been handled much before. It was unlikely Andrés had ever read them. Who knows what mysteries prevented him from finding them sooner, despite so much time and so many readings in that place, and especially from picking up that box and taking it to the office? I say chance because I think of Leticia and her outlandish theories. If we can see the future, she had once told me, we must acknowledge the determinism of the world. The human genome was also a predetermined series of possibilities, and yet chance intervened, arranging the outcome differently than planned. But it was simply another form of destiny. Chance is another part of such a structure, and we call chance that which we don't understand. Coincidences don't exist; every act has a purpose, hidden in the mud of a sewer, flowing slowly through tunnels beneath the streets of a city. The Freudian unconscious, so often attacked, so often dismissed, is perhaps nothing more than chance in disguise. Or something disguised as chance? The vicious cycle of the snake biting itself,

the number Pi? What wearies man, what overwhelms him, is not the tragedy of life itself, but repetition. Every scar breeds another wound.
He left the box in the dark. I told him to go. Pedro must already be at the factory.
- And you?
I wondered if I could trust him, it was too late for that.
-I'll stay and rummage around a bit. Don't say anything to her if she sees you. Can I trust you?
I placed the palm of my hand on her chest and with the other I smoothed down her curly hair a little. Tricks, I know.
“Yes, of course,” he said enthusiastically. I gently pushed him, and he disappeared into the darkness, with the flickering lights that finally went out at the foot of the stairs. I heard the door close. The basement had no locks or alarms; everything was open to anyone who wanted to explore, and that was the perfect camouflage to hide what didn't want to be seen. It was that, or absolute confidence in total impunity. Because all of it seemed so dark to me that it terrified me, and the very presence of the refrigerators held a symbolism that accentuated the connotations of fear. And the worst part was that I was beginning to sense that this symbol was a trick of my mind, and that everything was just as I was starting to suspect.
I rummaged through lower boxes. I discarded files, not really knowing what I was looking for. A familiar name had to be my bait, and finally I found it. The name Cintia Arraiga. It was an accounting folder recording merchandise inflows and outflows. The handwriting was appallingly childish, the grammar so basic it omitted conjunctions and periods. Or was all that on purpose? It was so illegible that I decided to set it aside. I kept searching, but they were all old balance sheet files, until I found the dates from ten years earlier. Cintia's handwriting was clearer, and it was a kind of minutes book of topics discussed in meetings. I wondered how many positions this woman had held, of varying degrees of responsibility. Who was she, really? The surname Arriaga sounded familiar; I'd heard it mentioned in Bernardo's town, always associated with that obsession with funerals and undertakers. Bernie had told me that the Arriaga family was a kind of matriarchy; the women wore the pants. The men were like drones, and sometimes they met the same fate. Or

perhaps it was like that of the male praying mantis? Everything he had told me fit with that image: the religion of death, so to speak, the women in charge of the courtship, and the men as pawns in the ritual.

Those notebooks must have been from the time when Adrián Giraldo was still alive. She mentioned him, of course. Amidst the business notes, she had written personal things, as if, while listening to the business conversations at meetings, her mind were divided into two simultaneously intense acts, so much so that when one yielded for a moment, the other intervened. Even her handwriting seemed to change: childlike in the secretary's style, clear in her personal writing. And in those intervals, she, perhaps without realizing it, was confessing. Adrián was driving her crazy; when would he die, when would he leave her in peace? It was a constant lament that grew stronger over the years. Comparing them with what she remembered of her husband's letters, it was clear that as her fury intensified, Giraldo's words became more ethereal, like someone venturing into the realm of madness.

I went back to the ledgers. Cintia's clumsy handwriting became clearer as I deciphered the punctuation marks, the incorrect spellings, the distorted letters. She was talking about ice cream makers, of course, and various products the factory produced at that time: portable ice cream makers, ice cream parlor machines, and so on. The same lapses occurred here as in the minutes books: there were sections where she reflected on the contempt she felt for her husband, and sometimes there were insults and obscenities framed by exclamation marks or written in capital letters. There were many ledgers; more were in the other boxes, simply sealed with packing tape.

I heard the engines in the workshops. They weren't as loud as during the day, but I assumed the night watchman must be cutting off the electricity like every weekend. I knew that wasn't the case. Officially, the power was cut, but there were generators keeping the freezing machines running, which, as Pedro had explained to me at the beginning, were necessary to prevent the insides of the machines from deteriorating. There was a lot of unsold merchandise, and that kept the engines in good condition, especially the insides of the freezers. When he explained all that, he took me to show me the empty refrigerators and the pristine white walls of the appliances. And I thought of my father, Tejada, of the meat that would rot in the slaughterhouse

and wouldn't last a day in the summer without the smell rising like an incandescent vapor invading the air. I also saw men carrying the carcasses in that state on their backs, their mouths and noses covered with dirty rags, surrounded by flies, and taking them to the refrigerated trucks. The meat would then freeze properly, the flies would die, and the butcher shops would probably manage as best they could.

Now the engines, running at low intensity, continued their work. Pedro must be supervising them, since that was his true job, she was now certain. He was Colonel Ansaldi's nocturnal conscience, according to Pedro himself, who must have taken pleasure in imagining it, as if that pride were a kind of orgasm.

Cintia's notebooks continued their work, uninterrupted. There were entries for merchandise arriving at two or three in the morning. I did the math. These dates coincided with weekends or holidays, rarely with weekdays. And it was precisely during these nighttime entries that she spoke most openly about her personal affairs. She wondered what to do with Giraldo. She seemed to hesitate, as if lingering traces of pity prevented her from making the decision she had already made. She spoke of the visits to the Borda psychiatric hospital, of Adrián's delusions, of the need to separate him from his son, to end this period of his life. But Giraldo always returned home when he was discharged. They couldn't keep him hospitalized because he had periods of such extreme lucidity that he would end up relapsing in contact with the other patients. The doctors were looking in Adrián's family for what didn't exist: the utopian remedies of peace and love.

Was he really sick? Was it perhaps hereditary?

I looked at the clock; it was three in the morning. I waited for the engines to fall silent and caught a glimpse of dawn through the ventilation vents near the roof. I grabbed three notebooks; I couldn't take any more. One of them, however, was essential. It was full of geometric drawings, almost an ancient treatise on Euclidean geometry, written in calligraphic handwriting, its pages stained by time with the patina of old books. It had been written by Cintia Arriaga, the prosaic secretary who chewed gum and swore. She was the same person, and yet she was someone else.

8

I slipped away like a thief who leaves a trail and makes a lot of noise, but at that time of Saturday morning there was only a third of the usual traffic. I took a taxi, sure that no one had seen me, but when I finally breathed a sigh of relief in the back seat, I thought I saw Pedro's face waving sarcastically at me from the factory gate. Was it a hallucination? My exhaustion was probably mistaken for fever and high blood sugar, even though they had nothing to do with each other. My imagination had always played tricks on me, but it had never betrayed me before. Perhaps it was time it did, disguising reality with patterns of falsehood, sinking me into depression and lowering my defenses.
I spent the entire weekend reading and deciphering Cintia's handwriting and codes. I went from bed to the sofa at midday, when I woke up after a restless few hours of sleep. I showered reluctantly, uneasy about wasting time on such trivialities of daily life. I ignored Renato's calls, avoided Bernardo's visit, and delved into the pages of a seemingly innocent log of entries and exits from a refrigerator factory.
Sitting in the armchair with two cushions behind my back and one under the elbow of the arm I was using to jot down notes and draw conclusions about Cintia's obvious contradictions. The numbers didn't match, but that wasn't what worried me. Accounting frauds were so stupid they were commonplace, vulgar aspects of everyday life. What bothered me was the way the merchandise was labeled, or rather, the purchase orders. They were more or less bulky, for two or three items at a time. Some numbers, I assumed, corresponded to the refrigerator model. I got up and went to the kitchen. I looked behind the Siam refrigerator that Bernie and I had bought. The number was long and didn't match the usual numerical designation at all, even though it was a different brand. I went back to the armchair, this time with a mortadella sandwich I'd taken from the refrigerator. After an hour of turning those figures over in every way I could think of, I decided to take a break and return to the personal gossip that constantly seeped into the numbers. Was it possible that Cintia hadn't noticed? Or was she doing it like

someone writing a private diary? That was probably it, but a diary like that is open to anyone, because the temptation to pry is implicit from the cover. But in an accounting record, who looks for such things?

On Saturday night I came to a conclusion that didn't surprise me. Cintia had decided to get rid of her husband. She said so explicitly, but how would she do it?

I went back to the numbers. A gust of cold wind blew in through the balcony window. I heard screeching brakes in the street and some shouting. I went to look. A car had hit a dog, and the dog's owner and the driver were arguing. There was a woman in the car, and she was looking at me.

It was Cintia and Ansaldi.

Did his Saturday night stroll include the Abasto area and Sarmiento Street, and the block where I lived? The dog probably wasn't part of his plan and had ruined the strange surveillance.

I was paranoid, it's true, but I didn't let on. Cintia didn't seem to recognize me. Colonel Ansaldi took out his wallet, gave a wad of cash to the dog's owner, who was offended, but the offense subsided when the colonel showed him a piece of paper, a credential, or something. Or maybe the gun he was carrying in a holster strapped to his chest under his cardigan. The Falcon drove on. The dog's owner wrapped the body in a garbage bag that the neighbors handed him. He picked it up and threw it in a dumpster next to a construction site near the corner. I saw him stand there for a while, counting the money, and then he put it in his pants pocket. He walked off toward the Abasto market.

Not-so-coincidental coincidences were Leticia's specialty. She said that we are all part of a network so vast that, as mere pieces the size of cells, perhaps atoms, maybe ions, until we find the smallest possibility of subdivision, we cannot even imagine it. We are a number, a unit. But the big question, I told myself, returning to the armchair, picking at the crumbs left on the plate, is whether unity encompasses infinity or contradicts it. I looked in a couple of books from the library. Euclidean mathematics denied the possibility of infinity because a number, by definition, designates a quantity made up of units. Unity is the number one, and the number one is unity. Infinity does not exist; therefore, the possibilities that the imagination creates are nothing

more than insinuations of the mind. But the other theory asks what the parameters are for defining, or measuring, that unity. An elephant is not the same as a grain of sand, but both are one in their substance. Both can be divided: the elephant into bones, flesh, blood; The grain of sand can be broken down into smaller grains. There is always a half of every half, so what is the limit? And what is the limit to the sum of the units? Perhaps the number of elephants is limited (but who can deny that there might be a planet where elephants reign supreme?), yet it is easier for us to imagine the immense number of grains of sand on the beach. First, then, infinity is defined as uncountable. Then, theory shows that nothing stops addition and division; therefore, infinity exists.

With this cluster of hypotheses, I went back to the numbers.

I went back to addition, but nothing led me to anything but astronomical figures that made no sense. I subtracted, divided, and multiplied the possibilities of the order numbers. I moved on to words.

The name of *Arbitrary knowledge* It was the company that had made most of the purchases abroad. I made some calls, including to my acquaintances in the newsroom; no one knew her. Finally, I thought of Mario. There were a few long seconds of silence on the other end of the line. Did he mind me calling him after midnight to ask him something trivial?

- Where did you get that from, Ceci?

"What's it to you?" I said jokingly, but she didn't like it. Then, without answering me, she gave me the answer I was expecting.

- Forget it , okay ?

It was them, without a doubt. Colonel Ansaldi, owner of the companies that included the factory, and Aranguren. It wasn't that they were also the foreign buyers, but the name concealed a group of commission agents, perhaps intermediaries or representatives of foreign groups. The regime, undoubtedly, largely maintained itself this way; weapons cost money, and they were stolen by guerrillas, leftists, and subversives, as they called them. But maintaining the regime for so long, with successive revolutions until they finally seized power, was costly.

But what were they selling? Not refrigerators, obviously.

The secret wasn't just in the numbers.

I opened the notebook filled with drawings. I'd barely had time to look at it the night before. The handwriting wasn't Cintia's, but a man's, probably. The pages were filled with geometric figures, mostly polyhedra, with so many faces that it was impossible for me to define them. There were concentric circles connecting the vertices of the polyhedra, both outward and inward. Suddenly, I thought of the infinite number of those projections, now limited only by the size of the page and the thickness of the pencil that drew them. Tired as I was, I couldn't lose the trail I'd found. I mixed coffee and rum, the only thing that kept me awake without losing my lucidity. The silence in the street was as profound as the howls of the dogs that had gathered around the container. They had emerged from the hidden corners of the building when they caught the scent of the corpse.

I turned the pages, resigned to understanding no more than the elementary parameters learned in school, radii, diameters and perimeters related to formulas written around and in the margin, as results and arithmetic verification of the schemes.

I reached the last page, and there was nothing but the incomprehensible abyss of the blank page. I played with the notebook, its pages half-wavy from the dampness of the storage room. Lost in thought, I turned the pages over and over, until I found that several were stuck together. I looked for the corners to separate them, but they weren't stuck together, they were folded, unfolding. And when I did, I saw the diagram, where the polyhedra were now arranged like furniture. Each one had a number, long, with letters in between, uppercase or lowercase.

I opened the purchase order book. I checked the numbers in both notebooks for each of the months and years listed. They matched almost exactly, and that was enough for me.

I was thrilled to have reached that result, but all they told me was the location of the refrigerators that were going to be taken out of storage. But was that really necessary when there were simply order numbers to check? The refrigerators weren't polyhedral, but simple squares or rectangles, if it was necessary to draw them.

I tried again to understand the diagrams. There were several double-page spreads, each one designating a location in the factory workshop. I copied the

diagrams onto another large sheet of paper on the kitchen table. Then I saw that each polyhedron diagram formed the vertex of a larger polyhedron. It was a map, an arrangement that had been repeated throughout all those months and years, and probably still served as a guide and reference for current sales. The machines that Pedro operated on weekends were to keep the contents intact until they were sold. If I could see the current records, I would know which items were being sold and to whom. But there were no names.

And the lyrics?

I separated the letters from the old codes. I filled two or three entire sheets with them, grouping them according to the code, the scheme, and their arrangement in the diagram. The number of letters matched the number of vertices of the polyhedron, and their arrangement in the diagram followed an alphabetical order from left to right and top to bottom. It was so easy, so obvious, that I wondered why I'd gone to so much trouble. It was like hiding an elephant—the same example again—behind the image of a grain of sand. But there are so many grains of sand that they completely obscure the elephant.

Who had the intelligence, or perhaps the ingenuity, to devise such labyrinths of overlapping illusions, where ordinary minds would only find sand on an uninhabited beach?

Where were the people? In those names that were formed by reconstructing the polyhedra, joining them together like chemical formulas.

Multiple names, infinite, perhaps.

And where were the owners of those names?

Too many questions went unanswered, and even my conjectures were thwarted by the sleep that finally overtook me. When I woke up on Sunday at one in the afternoon, my face was pressed against the slipcover of the armchair, which held so many old smells, reminders of vices and domestic tragedies—the old armchair from the house in Barracas. It was hard to open my sleepy eyes, my cheeks sticky with the rum that had spilled from the glass, because late in the day the coffee had given up, or had simply run out, for the good of the atrocious paradise of alcohol. It was hard, too, to get up. The

crutches were on the floor, meters away on the living room floor. To me, they felt like kilometers. That was one of the times I lamented being alone.
(My God!, why this stupid and brilliant ability to associate words that my mind has, this gift of languages that possesses me like a kind of curse: abstract thought, imaginative power, the multiple memory that is only a sample of that suffered by Funes, the character of Borges, who could forget nothing).
Suddenly, the face of Soledad, Dr. Ibáñez's lover, appeared with all that I knew about her, like opening a government file in an old Buenos Aires office. She had worked at the Borda Psychiatric Hospital; she could undoubtedly tell me something, even the smallest detail, about that enigma that Adrián Giraldo still was to me.
Anxiety was my driving force. I crawled on all fours across the floor (figuratively speaking, of course), like a lame dog. Drawing strength from my weakness, I got up and went to the bathroom. I got into the bathtub with cold water and the doorbell rang. A moment later, the telephone. I laughed at the paradoxes, God's gifts to human intelligence to bear life's absurdities with composure.
- Who is it?!
"Miss Cecilia," said the doorman. "I've come to collect the maintenance fees; they were due a week ago."
I grabbed my head.
-Yes, yes, I haven't forgotten. I get paid on Tuesday, Mariano, I promise you by then.
-That's fine, miss. If it were up to me, but you know, the consortium complains.
Yes, I told myself, the Consortium. Olympus, Heaven, the Judges, God? Who were they and where were they? Were they an entity created by the mind of man to torture himself?
The phone rang again; I tried to ignore it. I dried myself off and walked, now more steadily, using only one crutch, toward the bedroom. I looked at myself in the mirror; I was gaunt and translucent. How could I? My flesh was like a shroud. I thought of Papa Tejada. He was waiting for me somewhere in that indeterminate place. The Consortium? Perhaps that's the name of the

Association of the Dead. The building is a vast vertical cemetery filled with niches, some with balconies overlooking the River Styx, others with a narrow view of the Air Shaft of the Abyss. And from the Stygian port, Charon comes to collect the fees, the unwavering customs officer with infinite patience. And what was the phone? Perhaps the call from the other end, the voice and hand of a spiritualist.

The potential novel with all those elements ended up in the drawers where abortions are kept.

On the hundredth ring, I answered. It was Bernardo. Yes, yes, I'm fine, Bernie, I overslept. Friday was a busy day, and I brought folders home. I stayed up reading. Half-truths are a luxury, and they fit so well in every situation. He seemed satisfied. I called Renato to reassure him. No, Dad, don't come over today. My apartment is full of factory files. You know , I love being surrounded by papers. Another low blow hit the mark: Renato would succumb to the memory of my mother and stay home.

And I was free to call Soledad, who would keep me company for a while, but above all, who would fill the void of my ignorance. That's what being alone is, I think, not knowing how to fill the air pockets with certainties, which, though fallacious, are the bricks of my building, the stairs to the next floor, the hope that, because it's denied, remains hope, feeding on nothingness, and in it succumbs and lies, finally at peace. Or, who knows, surrounded by thorns, and that's why it can't move or leave. The dominion of the flesh over the soul.

I dialed the number. She would hate me for bothering her on a Sunday afternoon after a long week of hard work at the hospital, especially since I only called her out of necessity. She, who came to look after me when I was hospitalized, and whose affection I always doubted because I didn't know if her dedication was simply due to the friendship between Mateo and Bernardo.

-Hello, Sole, I'm Cecilia.

- What a surprise, Ceci! Is something wrong?

I laughed at the confirmation of the distrust that I myself had sown.

-It's okay. I know I call you when I need you, but...

-Don't worry , you caught me just as I was about to leave for the hospital.

- Are you working today? Excuse me , we'll leave it for another day.

No, no. It's just that Blas, Mateo's son, is hospitalized again at Ramos Mejía. If you'd like, I can stop by to visit him when he gets out; it's close to where I live. Do you need anything?
-Just a journalist's question, I can't shake the habit, you know .
-No problem, although I can't imagine how I can help you in that regard.
-About your work at the Borda.
- Ah! Prehistoric times, Ceci. Anyway, I have to go, Mateo is waiting for me in the car.
I prepared something to eat to go with my medication, taken outside of scheduled times, of course. If only I could prevent the men in my life from seeing me in this state until the exact moment it became unavoidable… The deterioration of my body was compatible with the ecstasy of my intellect in some ignominious way, because it grew in ego at its expense. But I can't call this entity in my head that either; it's something more: the metaphysical soul, the intermediate state of knowledge between superstition and science. Between the theological and the positivist. The accommodating zone where everything half-fits, the suburban neighborhood where the laborer and the doctor coexist, passing each other, greeting one another, without knowing each other.
And that space chained me to persist in my drama, attending as a spectator the grand opera unfolding on stage in which I was the protagonist. I didn't want to leave the theater, but the play would come to an end.
I reviewed the book of sketches and diagrams, the geometric book, as I called it. It was undoubtedly the product of a man, of a male mind accustomed to the concrete, to frameworks that can only be created with the skill of a trained visual memory, but above all by men's capacity to abruptly separate body from soul. The intensity of that separation is what provokes the intensity of their madness. Women's madness is different; their intellect is full of nuances subject to feeling: feeling saves them and destroys them. We are women who kill without remorse; men succumb to suicide because they do not find the longed-for peace in murder.
Soledad arrived at seven. She announced her arrival from the street with a honk of the horn. I went out onto the balcony and saw the Falcon; for a moment I feared the machine gun fire and all the trappings of war. But it

wasn't the colonel, it was Ibáñez's Falcon. Soledad got out of the car and greeted me. Mateo left and she went into the building. Two minutes later I heard the elevator on my floor, but I already had the apartment door open. We hugged; she walked me to the sofa, and we looked at each other for a moment in silence. She was beautiful, of course, with her brown hair falling in natural waves over her forehead. She was ten years older, but I was a decrepit old woman.

- How are you, Ceci?

-As you can see, I'm deteriorating.

Enough with that crap! Bernardo already told me you repeat that catchphrase every chance you get . You're unbearable...

I looked down and she apologized.

-Don't worry about it, I know I'm doing it to play the victim.

-And now you're doing the same thing, but oh well...at least you have a job to distract you from all those thoughts.

He looked at the folders and papers scattered on the armchair and the desk.

- What did you want to ask me?

-Then, first I wanted to know how Ibáñez's son is doing.

-More or less the same as always. He was born sick, with hemophilia, and I don't know how he's still living. He's fifteen and wants to be a doctor like his father. He could be a good doctor, one of those who listens and walks the patient to the door of the office, but I don't know if that's really what he wants. He doesn't say it, but I think he loves his father so much that he wants to make it up to him somehow for all the trouble he's caused him.

-Yes, that's it. We sick people cause problems for the healthy.

Soledad looked at me, flustered.

- Is that why you called me? If you want, I can recommend a psychologist, dear. I don't have time, and I don't work on Sundays.

She got up and went to the kitchen. I imagined her placing her hands on the counter and sighing deeply and slowly.

"Forgive me, I don't know what's wrong with me," I told him. "I spend a lot of time alone, and when someone comes around, I burst into lamentations I didn't know were there, on the tip of my tongue."

He returned after turning on the stove to make coffee.

- Excuse me. I love Blas as if he were my son.
I thought of Andrés, who was the same age. Both of them were weird kids.
Does Blas have friends?
-Of course not, his schoolmates avoid him, and besides, he misses half the year of classes due to hospitalizations or resting at home.
I know a cadet at the factory who's the same age. He's an orphan, and his mother is... possessive, to say the least.
"I know, you bitch, more like. I understand. But I don't think the relationship will work; most likely, identifying with each other's sorrows will only accentuate both of their pessimism."
I didn't mention the psychological reasoning I was using against what I had said before, but he noticed.
-I know, I know, shit. But I can't help it. Now tell me what you're up to, because I imagine this is all a journalistic investigation.
Was it?
- Do you remember a patient at the Borda hospital named Adrián Giraldo?
He thought for a moment, then looked at me with fear.
- What have you gotten yourself into?
- Because?
" Look , Ceci. I didn't really know him, only in the autopsy room. Mateo was called in by the ministry to determine the cause of death; I helped him in the operating room. They found the body on the outskirts of London. His internal organs had been removed, and they'd filled the body with dirt. It was a clear case of organ trafficking. Psychiatric hospital patients and orphanages are the main sources; there are also those who pay for healthier, ordinary people, but that's another, more expensive, parallel market. But we wondered why they'd gone to all that trouble with Giraldo, simply to simulate some sect's ritual or something. It wasn't common practice, and there was no need. During the autopsy, we knew nothing about the deceased. Later, when Minister Farías practically intimidated Mateo into keeping quiet and writing the autopsy report according to the official version, we got access to the medical records. You know how ministries are, especially ten years ago." The military was reorganizing itself, and they still didn't have complete control, especially when it came to old files of chronically insane people.

- And what did the medical record say?
"Giraldo was schizophrenic, it seems to run in the family. But every time he was discharged and went back to work, he relapsed. There were transcripts of his wife's account. She said her husband got sick when he went to work, that it wasn't good for him to return, and they had to fire him or force him into disability retirement. The company opted for retirement, which was fine, but when he was hospitalized, he started to recover. He was discharged and went back to his wife and son. After that, the incident in England happened. All of that is a police matter, and I don't know anything about it anymore."
- And where did he work, what did he do?
-I think he was an electronics engineer, and he worked for a refrigeration company, according to what Mateo told me.
He placed a hand on my shoulder.
- But aren't you working at Frigidaire? Now I understand, what's wrong with you, Ceci?!
I'd felt dizzy, of course. Not like some soap opera idiot because of the news I'd received, but because of the hypoglycemia. Soledad, from Barracas, like in the tango, where she'd been born and I'd lived, stayed to take care of me not like a nurse, but like a friend. The only one I ever had, the one I rejected when I felt better. I didn't need friends to do what I had to do. I drifted off to sleep on Sunday night, my mind clear for the first time in a long time, spurred on by anger.
Before leaving, I showed the notebooks to Soledad. She recognized Cintia's handwriting; it was the same as in the letters Giraldo had received, which were in the Borda Psychiatric Hospital's medical records. She couldn't forget it because back then she had wondered how someone could write such rudimentary English, which Giraldo had taken as fact, with such brutality, yet Giraldo had taken it as fact.
Unless it was deliberate. Confusing a disturbed person isn't difficult; you just have to mix truth and lies like in games of chance where a die is hidden in three cups that are spun around and around. And the chosen one is challenged to choose. The result is a trap, because the trap is the game.

9

It was late that Sunday, too late for any normal person to do anything but get into bed and sleep. I'm not one of them, and so I continued to brood over my anger at the woman who had gotten rid of her husband like that, because I had no doubt that Cintia was the one writing and receiving the letters from her office at the factory. I wondered what wrong he had done to her for her to plot such revenge, unless it wasn't just her feelings, but the influence of someone else. Then I thought of Ansaldi, who was very likely already her lover, and what Giraldo knew about the factory. All those graphics he designed formed the structure behind the commercial facade.
But what was behind it all?
If Cintia had led her husband into the same trap he had set, it was because they were involved in organ trafficking. Mario had already mentioned something to me several years before, in hushed whispers in the newsroom elevator, and skinny Scarfionne , who was either very quiet or had written a long article that no one but Beltrame ever read, and I think he destroyed it.
It was midnight. Pedro should be in the workshops. Perhaps he was already heading home after shutting down the generator, leaving no trace for Monday morning. In any case, I had no choice. In truth, I wasn't willing to give myself another chance. That job at the factory was, from the beginning, a kind of gift to my life. I should have died sooner, but I always found aspects of the world that interested me as much as an artist is interested in the beauty of a landscape or a person. I needed to capture them as faithfully as possible, knowing that truth is more arbitrary than lies, that it disguises itself and lies like an addict, that it slips away, hides, and feigns madness, insanity, and extreme lucidity in order to remain a mystery. Because known truth loses its aristocracy and its beauty and becomes vulgar like a slum maid.
But I have seen how that truth is reborn like a phoenix in the heart of that servant, and because she doesn't like what she sees, she transforms like Kafka's insect. Truth also suffers from mental illness, especially the dreaded schizophrenia. And it feeds on itself in that cycle of health and illness, until

the periods of illness become longer than those of illness. Finally, it dies from its own pain. And what death is to life, falsehood is to truth.
Knowing failure was inevitable, hope didn't appear, nor did good omens sing optimistic songs. Without expectations, I calmly left the apartment.
Beforehand, I called a taxi that waited for me in front of the building. The arches of the Abasto market looked dark, like those of an abandoned abbey. I thought of God for a moment, of the prayers that Papa Tejada had tried to teach me despite Mama's scolding. I couldn't remember any; instead, I gave the driver an address, a word and a number, cold as a mathematical equation that defined a space, a place, a site: perhaps Paradise, perhaps Hell. Milton and Dante had traveled them; neither of them came out unscathed.
Literature is more truthful than reality.
We arrived at the entrance to the workshops on Cabezón Street. There was only a mercury vapor lamp at the intersection with the avenue, where the traffic lights changed for no traffic at all. It was one in the morning.
"Where are you going at this hour, miss?" the driver asked me, a man of almost forty, badly shaven, but with the eyes of a boy.
"I don't think he cares," I told him.
-Excuse me for interfering, but you're not from the streets, and this area is dangerous.
- Why do you say that?
He shrugged and looked ahead again, but spoke to me while watching me in the rearview mirror.
"The area has had a bad reputation ever since the military moved in. I'm speaking to you with complete confidence because you don't seem to share those views."
I smiled at myself in the shadow of the back seat. The car's lights and engine were off. I began to doubt the man's intentions, but, well, he knows something, I told myself, and I wouldn't miss the opportunity.
- So you judge people by their appearance? Just because I'm partially disabled, you think I'm innocent?
"Don't get angry, but what do you want me to say? People who have problems with their bodies, serious problems, I mean, usually dedicate too much time to thinking about hurting others."

- And how do you know that I've thought the same thing many times, almost in the same words?
-Because I am also an ordinary man, and I know certain kinds of evil, miss, some inexplicable, although in the hustle and bustle of life one has no choice but to attribute them to one's own faults.
He paused to cough and light a cigarette. He offered me one.
"I know people too, sir. And you're probably just stringing me along to rape and kill me."
Serious.
"You can think what you want, but I don't think you really mean it. You've had plenty of time to think about the nature of men. In a hospital bed or at home waiting for your wounds to heal. You know, somehow, that men who do those things don't usually drive a taxi for next to nothing in the middle of the night through shady areas. They wait at home and think about weak women."
-I am one of them, if you didn't notice.
"Why does he use crutches? I don't think so. Those crutches can be a double-edged sword, but I'm not talking about that, I'm talking about his strength. An ordinary man, for example, me, would have killed himself in his place."
-Well, if that's how you put it, I don't think you're one of those people either. Tell me...
-Santiago, miss. Chávez, for more information.
-Tell me, Santiago, is that boy in the photo your son?
On the rearview mirror was a photograph of a very young child, and a tiny teddy bear dangling from a string like a hanged man. He grabbed it with his right hand and handed it to me.
-He was, miss. His name was Genaro. I killed him a month after that photo was taken.
-Don't say that, Santiago, I don't believe you.
He took two puffs of his breath and the smoke hid the driver's overwhelmed face.
"Anyway, I'm telling you how things are, not how I'd like them to be. There's a difference between dying and being murdered."
-But...an accident, it must have been that, right?

- What's that called...? Damn it, I can't think of it! Excuse me... There! Euphemism.
"I understand." I handed the photo back. "How much do I owe you?"
- Ten pesos and fifty cents, miss. Would you like me to wait?
-No, thank you, Santiago. May I ask you a personal question, or rather another one?
-At your service.
- How was it?
He sighed, exhaled a puff of smoke, and said:
"I ran him over with the truck. But he bled to death in the seat when I tried to take him to the hospital. Boys are weak, miss, their little bodies are like this teddy bear's, you understand? You can just tear them apart like that. Isn't that a shame?"
I got out and walked a few meters along the sidewalk. The car started moving again towards the avenue.
I had the keys, of course. Almost from the moment I started working, I had the keys to the main gate and the workshops. Many times I had to go and check the model numbers of items that were the subject of complaints. I wondered once again if this whole web of intrigue wasn't just a product of my imagination, because everything in the company was accessible and showed no signs of concealment. But my imagination was playing a trick on me in the opposite direction: what one expects is exactly that—hidden places and locked doors—which are almost always influenced by novels, movies, or television. Reality is usually simpler in its procedures, because most of the time, human eyes overlook so many things that what has been with us for years, when we see it again, is as if we were seeing it for the first time. What isn't hidden isn't sought, and what isn't usually found...
I entered the workshops in the dark. There was no noise, the motors were off, and the rats were probably asleep. I turned on the flashlight I had been careful to bring. The darkness made the vast spaces I had seen during the day seem smaller. There were disassembled refrigerator frames and casings, old and rusted, on one side. The entire room was divided into sections without walls, only by the work groups dedicated to different tasks. The unusable appliances were on the left side, where there were no windows. On the

opposite wall were the assembly machines; in the center, a set of pulleys and belts transported spare parts from station to station, where the workers assembled the pieces. In another section, further back, were the cranes that lifted the refrigerators and freezers for testing. I walked among the machines as if making my way through futuristic sculptures, because that's what they were in the darkness and stillness: inhabitants of an abandoned planet from some Bradbury novel.

There were numbers designating the workstations, and I remembered Giraldo's diagrams. Being in the center and on the same level, I lacked the perspective to visualize or orient myself. Studying those sketches so much had ingrained them in my memory, but reality was different. I wandered around among the machines, searching for the numbers, trying to reconstruct the plan according to the current location. I would stop to write in my notebook, resume walking, and stop again. It was a slow process: walking with crutches, putting them on the floor, positioning the flashlight to illuminate my path, writing, and then reversing the process.

Between breaks and work, it took me over an hour to realize I hadn't even covered a third of the place. Further on, there were more machines and more empty spaces. The night watchman was due to arrive at 4:30, and how would I explain my presence? But I couldn't leave now; the job was only half done, and next time the layout might be different, and it would all be back to square one.

But what was I looking for? One of the polyhedra in the book matched the second group I had found. They were the oldest machines, probably from Giraldo's time. That encouraged me to continue, and above all, it confirmed that the arrangement of the machines didn't exactly correspond to the distribution of the finished appliances. The polyhedra on the single pages represented the manufacturing machines, but those on the double-page spreads corresponded to the refrigerators, whatever type they were.

So I abandoned the painstaking task of observing and writing, and walked straight to the back. I heard noises. It was the rats, this time. Either they had woken up, or there was something in that place that interested them. There were no cats, the men had told me. Any cat that came in died a few months later. One or many, they didn't last.

The beam of the flashlight startled many groups of rats. I wasn't afraid of them; I was used to seeing them at the slaughterhouse and all over the neighborhood during my childhood. Those that didn't flee stayed at the base of the appliances. I tested it: turning off the light made them resume gnawing. Turning it on abruptly caught them in the act. They had nicked and chipped away a large portion of the metal, without managing to penetrate it. It was a task they must have been attempting for a long time, judging by the state of the appliances: half-sunken, faded, and rusted.

While they sniffed my good foot or tried to chew on the rubber tips of my crutches, I let them do it to keep them occupied while I got ready to open the refrigerators. The motors were warm, as if they hadn't been running for more than an hour or two. Some were ordinary kitchen refrigerators, others were low-profile like the ones in stores or freezers. I chose one of the latter. There were no padlocks, but they were closed with a lever-type handle. I had to use both hands, so I didn't have any light at first. I lifted the lid and was hit in the face by a blast of intense cold. But when I picked up the flashlight from the floor, I began to smell. Then, the light revealed what my memory had shown me before: the entrails wrapped in transparent bags, one next to the other, one on top of the other, in several piles. They looked like hearts, I think.

I closed the lid. I went to another device. I did the same thing: livers? Possibly.

I went from organ to organ, following the perimeter of the polyhedron: kidneys, hearts, livers, corneas in flat bags, countless bones, femurs, tibias, humeri, jaws. Everything that could be transplanted by surgeons anywhere in the world.

I kept searching. More iceboxes in more polyhedrons. The rats followed me; perhaps they liked the rubber on the crutches they'd almost completely gnawed through. I kept opening the lids, accessible to anyone who wanted to see inside, to any man or woman on the street who even suspected something, maybe even the mother or father or friend of those whose frozen viscera I'd once owned. How long could they last? What did medical science say? Did it even matter?

I arrived at the ordinary refrigerators. The kind in the kitchens of any ordinary person's house or apartment, where they store meat for Sunday's

barbecue. Inside, there were pieces of bodies, some cut up, others perhaps whole , but I didn't stop to tell the difference. Standing upright, pressed against the refrigerator walls, some with skulls full of meat, others with purple skin, many with their eyes still open, staring at me as I opened the door.
The rats got in, yes. That was my oversight. Pedro should have been very careful to prevent it.
Pedro, the cemetery caretaker.
The Emperor of Ice Cream.

10

- What are you doing here, Cecilia?
The voice behind me was the echo of my memory, reproducing and expanding through the workshops until it reached the ceilings and spoke to me from there. The voice that is everywhere and nowhere. Pedro's voice had become the voice of my conscience, and then I knew, once and for all, that whatever happened, I was already condemned, like all of us who had participated, in one way or another, in this holocaust.
I turned to face him. He stood there with the same expression, manufactured in the workshop of stupidity, with which he had deceived Dora, and surely himself many times when gazing into the mirror. But at the end of his right arm, his hand gripped the knot of a large, bulging burlap sack resting on the floor.
-If you did a little research, Pedro, you'll have figured it out. Why are you asking? Stop being hypocritical with me.
"There are few of us and we know each other very well, right? That's what they used to say in my town."
- Is that so? They say so everywhere, as far as I know. And what does he have in his bag, if I may ask?
-Sarcasm is also a kind of hypocrisy, Cecilia, or euphemism, if you prefer.

(Who had uttered that word earlier that night? Ah, the driver.)
-That's true. So do what you have to do, I've seen much worse around here.
-You are a very strong woman.
(Again, the terms, the similar phrases)
He lifted the bag with great effort onto his right shoulder, bent down slightly, and rested it on his back. I thought I was seeing one of my father's old colleagues, or perhaps my father himself, herding cattle through the slaughterhouse yards. He dropped it next to one of the empty coolers they had seen. He cut the cloth with a knife and ripped the rest open, revealing three bodies.
I fell to the ground, my tailbone hitting the floor. My legs couldn't hold me up because I'd lost all sense of space; it was all empty, a kind of black hole that sucked me in like a whirlwind of hurricane-force winds. My head was spinning as I tried to focus my gaze on a fixed point, the only thing that wasn't moving and wouldn't move again on its own: the corpses of Dora and her children.
I screamed, covering my mouth with my hands, so nothing came out but a moan, a kind of stupid cow mooing for the death of its calves in my father's slaughterhouse. And that involuntary comparison, perhaps long locked away in the walls of my skull, made me feel guilty. The resentment I harbored toward Papa Tejado for abandoning me, for dying and leaving me to the whims of the world with the inheritance of his legacy, placed him alongside Pedro Espinoza. Both men carrying corpses on their backs. And that, I knew, wasn't fair.
Pedro approached me, knelt beside me, took my head in his hands and rested it on his chest, just as my father used to. That man embodied many; he was one and another successively. He was no one, and he was everyone.
"Why?!" I asked, crying.
"The colonel..." he began.
But you saved his life twice, he doesn't owe you anything. He owes you...
-However, I owe him my freedom.
- The freedom to kill?
“Dora wanted to take them with her, she told me this morning, when we were drinking mate in the patio, and the boys were still asleep. Cecilia was right, she said. You made the seed I thought was dead sprout. You know how some

seeds wait a long time to germinate, you think they’re dry and then, suddenly, one day they sprout, and they withstand the harshest weather. I’ve seen them in the fields my father burned. In the middle of the fire, and several months later, you see a little green plant peeking out of the ground. That’s what Dora told me, a humble little plant, but too tough to fight. There was nothing left to do but pull it out by the roots. And the poor boys, now they won’t suffer the punishment of their bodies anymore. You understand that well, don’t you? I can tell you about the punishment of the mind. When they shot me, I had lost more than half my memories. All I had was nothing but fields, fire, and blows.” The tearing of the earth during our constant moves, the policemen's gunshots, which they thought would intimidate my old man, and during his imprisonment, the visits from the priest who slept with my mother. And one day, in the countryside, he came with me, talking about manly things, as he said I needed to talk, and he showed me how it was done, and from then on, for all those months, he would take me to the river or the cornfield and rub his naked body against mine, and have sex with me. Just like that, I'm telling you. You can see he had a lot of life to offer: my mother, me, the indigenous women from the village, and the prostitutes from the brothel. Afterward, he would offer all that work to God, kneeling before the altar of the chapel. I saw him many times from the doorway. I even thought about grabbing the silver chalice that the bishop had brought on the day of our patron saint and smashing his head in.

If he thought he could move me, he didn't. The magnetic tapes of my memory were recording.

I lived with that fragmented memory for a long time, stronger than ever because I didn't have the weight of what came later. It spurred me on at night and appeared to me in broad daylight, and I couldn't speak, the words wouldn't come. But all those memories sprouted together many years later, and the plants were thorny like my surname, tough and wounding. That's what I was, that's what I am. I didn't know what to do with all of this, until I met the colonel.

-He already killed the others, and now these ones, who's next?

- Why didn't you have children, Cecilia? Not that, because of your illness, your body is a constant surprise.

I moved away from him. I hadn't had my period for two months, but my irregularity was so frequent that it hadn't bothered me. The weight of the world came crashing down on me, the workshop ceilings collapsed, trapping all the machines and their contents inside. I think I fainted, but I still felt myself being lifted into someone's arms, then the sound of a car engine. When I opened my eyes, it was dawn, and I was in Pedro's truck. My face was pressed against the seat back, and I smelled blood. I struggled to open the door.

"Don't worry, Cecilia, it's not your blood. It's a stain that's been on the seat since I bought the truck; it liquefies from time to time. It must be the weather or something, or maybe it's just the miracle of Saint Januarius."

(Again, the taxi driver and his son, and the same van, obviously. The names gathered and were joined by common ties, the polyhedra, and then the circles that harmonized them)

He looked at me, condescendingly, with a half-smile that wasn't sarcasm but something else so unfamiliar that I didn't dare look at him again. Where was he taking me? To the outskirts of the city, to kill me in the middle of the countryside. But he could have done it at the factory. Instead, I discovered the route we took when he drove me home. He parked, picked me up, and carried me up to the apartment, leaving me on the bed.

Why did he insist on letting me live? I was a dog, a witness to everything, and I couldn't speak. Surely he had never killed a dog; the fact that he counted them along the roads, as he told me he did, showed his concern for them.

11

But he could write.

If I had inherited pain and illness from my father, I had received the catharsis of words from my mother.

I went to the hospital, Ramos Mejía, which was not only close by but also a place where Bernardo didn't know of anyone. I remembered that Ibáñez's son

was hospitalized and that I might run into Mateo. I didn't have the energy to waste any more time, so I went, explained the situation to the doctor on duty, and they drew blood for tests. Ready to go home and delay getting any news until the next day, I thought about Blas. I asked at reception for the room number. I went up to the floor in the crowded elevator, which included a gurney with a woman who had just come out of surgery. We looked at her in silence, and she looked at us, embarrassed. My eyes, however, were filled with frozen bodies.

I walked down the hall to the bedroom door. I peeked inside and there was no one there but the boy in the bed, pale and with two IV lines feeding him saline solution and blood in each arm.

-Hello- I said.

He looked at me listlessly.

-He went to the wrong room.

- You're Blas Ibáñez, aren't you? My name is Cecilia, I'm a friend of your dad and Soledad.

I went in and sat down in the chair next to the bed. He was thin like Andrés, but thinner and sickly. However, they both had the same expression of confusion and pessimism.

-I was just passing by, and I thought, why not stop by and visit him? Your dad must be working at this hour, and you must spend your mornings alone.

"Yes, he comes in the afternoon or evening, when he's finished with his patients. Thank you..." she told me, embarrassed.

-You're welcome. So you want to be a doctor too? There are already so many in the family…

My sarcasm came out, I couldn't help it, but I don't think the boy understood.

-Well, yes, I think so. My dad is very good, everyone respects him, and I want to be like him.

I thought of Andrés Giraldo. It was Blas's asymmetrical relationship with his parents. I knew his mother had died shortly after he was born. In one, the father was a marvel; in the other, the mother a villain. Both lacked the counterweight to balance the unstable scales of adolescence.

"I know a young man who works as a messenger in my office, and it occurred to me that you two might get along well. You both seem lonely among so many adults."
-I don't get along with boys my age.
That depends on the person you're trying to befriend. Most aren't worth the effort, but there are exceptions from time to time.
-As you wish, miss.
He scratched his arm with the IV line; it was swollen and had a rash.
Here , I've written his phone number on the nightstand. When you get home, if you want , you can call him . I 'll leave you now. Get well soon, Blas. You're going to be a great doctor, better than your dad.
I saw her smile, and it was a balm that enveloped me until I got home.
I started writing. Pages and pages piled up in the folder that holds all these writings. The afternoon hours passed, night fell, and the typewriter stopped. I continued writing by hand after resting. My neighbors, always so kind, sometimes complained about the annoying typing at night, which could be heard not through the thick walls of the old building, but in the hallway, whose echo was like the acoustics of a theater.
When I finished, at three in the morning, I went to bed.
The next day, I returned to the hospital. They handed me the envelope with the results. I avoided eye contact, focusing on myself, my gaze fixed on the peeling walls and damp ceilings, as if I were walking through empty corridors that turned into tunnels, where the white paint was slowly crumbling away, revealing old paintings that had disappeared years before, layered over others. And as they fell away, the old stains reappeared, like skin cancers, forming maps of extinct continents. And those unexplored worlds were so fascinating that I needed to go to them.

A week later, I got a call from Leandro. I hadn't seen him in so long that I was eager to talk to him. He just looked at me with pity, and I repeated my self-pitying, pitiful refrain about my constant decline. I enjoyed the sympathetic looks from the people at the bar where we met. I also enjoyed the charade of talking about the refrigerator company as if I were still working there, until I finally confessed that I'd been fired.

We went to my apartment. He skimmed through some of my writing while I changed in the bedroom and prepared the ampoules. That night we slept together for the first time since we met in high school.
I woke up. No, I'm wrong, I hadn't quite fallen asleep. I sat up in bed, making sure he was still asleep, dreaming in his written worlds that I so admired. I broke the ampoules, filled the syringe. I adjusted the rubber tourniquet on my left arm, waited for the vein to swell and become a rushing river in the rugged map of my body.
I injected myself with the substance that would drag me to where pain is nothing more than a sarcastic utopia invented by the mind of God to compensate for its unyielding emptiness.

Belén de Escobar
July 2024 – March 2025

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